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GERARD

OR

THE WORLD, THE FLESH, AND THE DEVIL

A Nobel

BY THE AUTHOR OF

“LADY AUDLEY’S SECRET,” “VIXEN,” “ISHMAEL,”

“THE DAY WILL COME”

ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.

LONDON

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GERARD ;

OR,

THE WORLD, THE FLESH, AND THE DEVIL.



CHAPTER I.

“OUT WENT MY HEART’S NEW FIRE, AND LEFT
IT COLD.”

GERARD HILLERSDON and Mrs. Champion met but rarely during the month of May. Doomed men are apt to linger beyond the anticipations of their medical attendants, and the famous physician from Cavendish Square continued his bi-weekly visits through all the bright long sunny days which society’s calendar has devoted to the pursuit of pleasure—a chase from which Mrs. Champion’s handsome face and form were missing. Other figures there were as perfect, other faces as famous for beauty ; and it was only

once in a way that one of the butterflies noted the absence of that Queen butterfly; it was only once in a way that friendship murmured with a sigh, "Poor Mrs. Champion, mewed up with an invalid husband all through this lovely season!"

Edith Champion gave the fading life her uttermost devotion. She had a keen sense of honour, after all—this wife who had gone on loving her first lover all through her married life. She had a more sensitive conscience than her world would have readily believed. She wanted to do her duty to the dying husband, so that she might surrender herself heart and mind to a new life of gladness when he should be at peace, and yet feel no sting of remorse, and yet have no dark memory to fling its shadow across her sunlight.

With this laudable desire, she spent the greater part of her life at Finchley, where she had taken a villa near the doctor's house, so as to be within call by day or night. She withdrew herself from all friends and acquaintances except Gerard Hillersdon, and even him she saw only two or three times a week, driving into London and taking tea in the cool Hertford Street drawing-room, with her nerves always strained by the

dread of some urgent telegram that should call her back to her duties.

"The end may come at any moment," she said. "It would be dreadful if I were absent at the last."

"Do you think it would really matter—to him?" asked Gerard.

"I think it would. He rarely addresses me by name, but I think he always knows me. He will take things from my hand—food or medicine—which he will not take from his nurses. They tell me he is much more restless when I am not there. I can do very little for him; but if I can make him just a shade easier and calmer by sitting at his bedside it is my duty to be there. I feel that it is wrong even to be away for a couple of hours this afternoon—but if I did not leave him and that dreary house once in a way I think my brain would go as his has gone."

"Is the house so very dreadful?"

"Dreadful, no. It is a charming house, nicely furnished, the very pink of neatness, in the midst of a delightful old garden. It is what one knows about it—the troubled minds that have worn themselves out in those prim, orderly rooms, the

sleepless eyes that have stared at those bright, pretty wall-papers, the wild delusions, the attempted suicides, the lingering deaths! When I think of all those things, the silence of the house seems intolerable, the ticking of the clock a slow torture. But you will teach me to forget all this misery by and by, Gerard? You will teach me to forget, won't you?"

That was the only allusion she had ever made of late to the near future. It was forgetfulness she yearned for, as the chief boon the future could bestow.

"You cannot think how long this summer has seemed to me," she said. "I hope I am not impatient, that I would not hasten the end by a single day—but the days and the hours are terribly long."

An hour was the utmost respite that Mrs. Champion allowed herself in that cool perfumed room, *tête-à-tête* with her first lover, surrounded with all the old frivolities, the tea-table, set out with tiny *foie-gras* sandwiches, and hot-house fruit, the automatic Japanese fan, mounted on a bamboo stand, set in motion with the lightest touch, the new books and magazines scattered about, to be

carried off in her victoria presently, for the solace of wakeful nights. Only an hour of converse with the man she loved, broken into very often by some officious caller, who saw her carriage at the door, and insisted upon being let in.

It seemed to her now and then that Gerard was somewhat absent and restrained during these interviews, but she attributed his languid manner to the depressing nature of all she had to tell him. Her own low spirits communicated themselves to him.

“We are so thoroughly in sympathy,” she told herself.

He left her one afternoon late in June, and instead of going into the Park where the triple rank of carriages by the Achilles statue offered to the admiring loungeur a bouquet of high-bred beauty, set off by the latest triumphs of court dressmakers, he walked past the Alexandra Hotel and dropped into Sloane Street, and thence to Chelsea. His feet had taken him in that direction very often of late.

He had found no difficulty in discovering Hester’s dwelling-place, for on his way to the

St. Cecilia Club he had stumbled against old Davenport, bottle-nosed, shabby, but wearing clean linen, carefully brushed clothes, and with a certain survival of his old Oxford manner.

Neither drunken habits nor dark vicissitudes had impaired the old man's memory. He recognised Hillersdon at a glance, and cordially returned his greeting.

"Wonderful changes have come about since we saw each other in Devonshire, Mr. Hillersdon," he said. "I have gone very low down the ladder of Fortune, and you have gone very high up. I congratulate you upon your good luck—not undeserved, certainly not. You acted like a hero, my dear young friend, and such an act merited a handsome reward. I read the story in the newspapers."

"A much exaggerated version of the truth, no doubt. I'll walk your way, if you please, Mr. Davenport. I should like to hear how the world has used you."

"No better than it uses a homeless mongrel, sir; but perhaps no worse than I deserved. You remember what Hamlet says: 'Use every man after his desert, and who shall 'scape whipping?'

I don't like to take you out of your way, Mr. Hillersdon."

"My way is no way. I was only strolling—with no settled purpose."

They were on the Chelsea embankment, where the old houses of Cheyne Walk still recall the old-world restfulness of a day that is dead, while the Suspension Bridge and Battersea Park tell of an age that means change and progress.

"You like old Chelsea and its associations," said Davenport.

"Very much. I remember the place when I was a boy, and I recognise improvement everywhere; but I grieve over the lost landmarks, Don Saltero, the old narrow Cheyne Walk, the sober shabbiness——"

"There are older things that I remember—in the days when my people lived in Lowndes Square, and I used to come fresh from Balliol to take my fill of pleasure in the London season. My father was a prosperous Q.C., a man employed in all the great cases where intellect and oratory were wanted. He was earning a fine income—though not half as much as your famous silk-gowns earn nowadays—and he spent as fast as

he earned. He had a large family and was very liberal to his children—and when he died, in the prime of life, he left his widow and orphans the fag-end of a lease, a suite of Louis Quatorze furniture, already out of fashion, a choice collection of Wedgwood, and a few Prouts, Tophams, Hunts, and Duncans. He had put away nothing out of the big fees that had been pouring in for the last fifteen years of his life. He used to talk about beginning to save next year, but that next year never came. The sale of the lease and furniture made a little fund for my mother and three unmarried daughters. For me and my brothers the world was our oyster—to be opened as best we might.”

“ You had scholarship to help you.”

“ Yes, Greek and Latin were my only stock in trade. A friend of my father’s gave me a small living within a couple of years of my taking priest’s orders, and on the strength of that I married, and took private pupils. I lost my wife when Hetty was only twelve years old, but things had begun to go wrong before then. My second living was in a low district, village and vicarage on clay soil, too many trees, and no

drainage. The devil's tooth of neuralgia fastened itself upon me, body and bones, and my life for some years was a perpetual fight with pain. Like Paul I fought with beasts—invisible beasts—that gnawed into my soul. Here is my poor little domicile. I hardly knew we had walked so far.”

He had taken his homeward way automatically, while Gerard walked beside him, through shabby streets of those small semi-detached houses which the builder has devised for needy gentility and prosperous labour—here the healthy mechanic with five and thirty shillings a week, corduroy trousers and shirt sleeves, there the sickly clerk, with a weekly guinea and a threadbare alpaca coat. Here shining windows and gaily filled flower-boxes, there dirt and slatternliness, broken bottles, and weeds in the tiny forecourt, misery and squalor in its most hideous aspect. Gerard had marked the shabbiness of the neighbourhood, and he felt that somewhere in the midst of this sordid labyrinth he should find his Ariadne, though her hand would never have furnished him with the clue.

The house before which Mr. Davenport stopped

was no better than the other houses which they had passed, but the best had been made of its shabbiness, the forecourt was full of stocks and carnations, and a row of Mary lilies marked the boundary rail which divided this tiny enclosure from the adjacent patch. The window-panes shone bright and clear, and the window-box was a hanging garden of ivy-leafed geranium, yellow marguerites, and mignonette.

"What a pretty little garden," exclaimed Gerard.

"Yes, there are a good many flowers for such a scrap of ground. Hettie and I are very fond of our garden—we've a goodish bit of ground at the back. It's about the only thing we can take any pride in with such surroundings as ours."

And then, lingering at the gate, as Gerard lingered, the old man asked—

"Will you come in and rest after your walk? I can give you a lemon squash."

"That's a tempting offer upon one of the hottest afternoons we have had this year. Yes, I shall be pleased to sit down for half an hour, if you are sure I shan't be in your way."

"I shall be very glad of your company. I

get plenty of solitude when Hettie is out on her long tramps to Knightsbridge. She often passes the house in which her grandfather used to entertain some of the best people in London—a work-girl, with a bundle under her arm. Hard lines, ain't it?"

He opened the door and admitted his visitor into a passage fourteen feet by two feet six, out of which opened the front parlour and general living room, a small room, with a little stunted cupboard on each side of the fireplace. Gerard looked about him with greedy eyes, noting every detail.

The furniture was of the commonest, a pembroke table, half a dozen cane-seated chairs, a sofa such as can only be found in lodging-house parlours; but there were a few things which gave individuality to the room, and in some wise redeemed its shabbiness. Fronting the window stood a capacious arm-chair, covered with apple-blossom chintz; the ugly sofa was draped with soft Japanese muslin; a cheap paper screen of cool colouring broke the ugly outline of the folding doors, and a few little bits of old china and a row of books gave meaning to the wooden slabs at the top of the dwarf cupboards.

There was a bowl of flowers on the table, vivid yellow corn-cockles, which brightened the room like a patch of sunlight."

"Try that easy chair," said Davenport, "it's uncommonly comfortable."

"Thanks, no," seating himself near the window, "this will do very nicely. That's your own particular chair, I know."

"You are right," sighed the old man, sinking into its cushioned depths. "This chair was Hettie's present on my last birthday. It was a shabby old chair when I first saw it at a broker's in the King's Road—but I was caught by the comfortable shape—and I told my poor girl I'd seen a second-hand chair that looked the picture of comfort. She didn't seem to take much notice of what I said, and the next time I passed the dealer's yard—where the chair used to stand in the open air amongst a lot of other things—it was gone. I told Hettie it had disappeared. 'Sold, I suppose,' said she, 'what a pity!' And nearly a year afterwards, on my birthday, the chair was brought in, freshly covered, as you see it. My poor girl had been paying for it by instalments, a shilling or two at a time, ever

since I mentioned it to her. How proud and happy we both were that day, in spite of our poverty. I remember when I was at the University my brothers and sisters and I clubbed together to buy a silver tea-kettle for my mother on her silver-wedding day—and it only resulted in general mortification. She was sorry we had spent our money—and she didn't like the shape of the kettle. It was half covered with a long inscription, so we couldn't change it, and I know two of my sisters were in tears about it before the day was over. But I must make you that lemon squash. *Nunc est bibendum!* Perhaps though, you'd prefer a John Collins?"—with a curiously interrogative look. "There isn't any gin in the house, but I could send for a bottle."

"I much prefer the unsophisticated lemon; though I envy a city waiter the facility with which he made his name a part of the convivial vocabulary. Falstaff could not have done more."

Mr. Davenport opened one of the dwarf cupboards, and produced tumblers, lemons, and pounded sugar. Then he went out of the room, and reappeared in a few minutes with a jug of fresh water. His narrow means did not permit

the luxury of a syphon. He concocted the two glasses of lemonade carefully and deliberately, Gerard Hillersdon watching him all the time in a melancholy reverie; but the image that filled his mind was that of the absent daughter, not the form of the father bodily present to his eye.

He was thinking of yonder easy-chair, paid for in solitary shillings, the narrow surplus left from the necessities of daily life. He thought of that refined and delicate face, that fragile form, far too finely made for life's common uses—thought of her daily deprivations, her toilsome walks, her weary monotony of task-work.

Yes, there was the modern wheel upon which feminine poverty is racked—the sewing-machine. It stood in front of the window by which he was sitting. She had covered it with a piece of art muslin, giving an air of prettiness even to the instrument of her toil. A pair of delf candlesticks stood on a little table near the machine, with the candles burnt low in the sockets. She had been working late last night, perhaps. It maddened him to think that out of all his wealth he could do nothing to help her—she would take nothing out of his superabundance. If he were

to heed the appeals of all the strangers who wrote to him—pouring out their domestic secrets, their needs and troubles, in eight-page letters, he might give away every penny of his income—but this one woman, whom he yearned to help, would take nothing. This was Fate's sharpest irony. Full of these thoughts, he sipped his lemonade and discussed the political situation with Mr. Davenport, whose chief occupation was to read the papers at the Free Library, and who was an ardent politician. He lingered in the hope of seeing Hester before he left.

It was nearly four o'clock, and the June afternoon had a drowsy warmth which was fast beguiling old Nicholas Davenport into slumber. His words were coming very slowly, and he gradually sank into a blissful silence, and was off upon that rapid dream-journey which takes the sleeper into a new world in an instant—plunges him into the midst of a *dramatis personæ* that moment invented whom he seems to have known all his life.

A bee was humming amongst the sweet-scented stocks, and a town butterfly was fluttering about the mignonette. A hawker's cry in the next

street came with a musical sound, as if the hawker had been some monotonous bird with a song of only three notes. Still Gerard lingered, hoping that the old man would wake presently and resume the conversation. He was in despair at the idea of leaving without seeing Hester.

He wanted to see that delicately-modelled face—the face in the Sposalizio—in the daylight. He wanted to be her friend, if she would let him. What harm could there be in such a friendship? They were too completely severed by the iron wall of circumstances ever to become lovers. But friends they might be—friends for mutual help and comfort. He could share with her the good things of this life. She could spiritualise his lower nature by the influence of that child-like purity which set her apart from the common world.

He heard a light footstep, and then the click of a latch. She was at the gate, she was coming in, a slim and graceful figure in a light cambric gown and a sailor hat, such a neat little white straw hat, which cast pearly shadows on the exquisite cheek and chin, and darkened the violet eyes.

She started and blushed crimson on seeing him, and darted a despairingly reproachful look at her father, who had risen confusedly in the midst of a dream. Gerard, too, had risen as she entered, and stood facing her.

“Don’t be angry with your father or with me, Miss Davenport. We happened to meet each other an hour ago on the Embankment, and I walked home with him. And now that I am admitted to your home you will let me bring my sister, I hope. She will be glad to renew her old friendship with you. Do not hold her at arm’s length, even if you shut your door against me. You know how sympathetic she is.”

Hester did not answer him for a minute or so. She sank into a chair, and took off the neat little hat, and passed her hand across her brow, smoothing the soft pale brown hair which shadowed her forehead. She looked tired and harassed, almost too weary for speech, and at last, when speech came, there was a languor in her tone, an accent as of one who submits to fate.

“Yes, I remember,” she said, “your sister was always good and sweet. She was very kind to me; some of my happiest hours were spent with

her. But that is all past and done with. It is hardly kind of you to ask me to remember——”

“I don’t want you to remember the old life. I only want you to open your heart to an old friend, who will help to make your present life happier. Lilian may come, may she not? I can see you mean yes.”

“How can I say no, when you are so eager to do me a kindness?” and then she glanced at the old man piteously. “If father does not mind a face that will recall his residence at Helmsleigh, and all he suffered there.”

“No, no, Hettie, I don’t mind. I have suffered too much, and in too many places, since the Pain-devil stuck his claws into me. If the people who blame me—who talk of me as a drunken old dotard—could suffer an hour of the agony I have suffered off and on for months at a stretch, they would be a little more charitable in their judgments. I am not blaming your father, Mr. Hillersdon; he was very good to me. He bore with me as long as he could, till at last I disgraced myself. It was a terrible scandal; no man could bear up against it. I felt after that night all was over.”

"Don't, father, don't speak of it."

"I must, Hettie. I want to tell Mr. Hillersdon all that you have been to me—what a heroine, what a martyr!"

"Nonsense, father! I have only done what other daughters are doing all the world over. And, thank God, you are better now! You have had very little of the old pain for the last two years. You are stronger and better, living as you do now, than when—when you were less careful. Your neuralgia will never come back, I hope."

"If Miss Hillersdon doesn't mind visiting us in this shabby lodging, we shall be very pleased to see her," said Davenport, brushing away a remorseful tear. "It cuts me to the heart that my poor girl has not a friend in the world except that best of women, Lady Jane Blenheim."

His request being granted, Gerard had no excuse for delaying his departure. He offered his hand to Hester as he said good-bye, and when her slender fingers touched his own, his cheek and brow flushed as if a wave of fire had passed over his face, and his eyes grew dim; only for a moment, but that fiery wave had never

clouded his vision at the touch of any other woman—not even Edith Champion, to whom he had given the devotion of years. His heart was beating violently as he walked along the shabby street, past gardens that were full of summer flowers, and forecourts that were no better than rubbish heaps, past squalid indigence and industrious poverty. It was not till he pulled up under the shadow of the trees in Cheyne Walk that the sense of a great joy or a great trouble began to abate, and he was able to think calmly.

He seated himself on a bench near the river, and waited till his pulses beat a more tranquil measure.

“I am a fool,” he muttered. “Why should her beauty agitate me like this? I have seen beautiful women before to-day—women in the zenith of their charms, not pallid and worn like this heroic girl. The woman who is to be my wife is handsomer, and in a grander style of beauty. And yet, because I must not care for this one, every nerve is strained, every pulse is racing. I am a fool, and the worst of fools, remembering what old Dr. South told me. Is this sparing myself? is this husbanding my

resources? To be so moved by such a trivial cause—not to be able to admire a beautiful face without being shaken as if by an earthquake.”

He remembered the book upon his writing-table, the “*Peau de Chagrin*,” that story which had an irresistible fascination for him, every page of which he had hung over many a night in his hours of lonely thought. How vain had been Valentine’s endeavour to lead that passionless life in which the oil in the lamp burns slowly. But he hoped to prove himself wiser than Balzac’s ill-fated hero. He, too, had planned an existence free from all strong emotions. In his life of millionaire and man of fashion there were to be no agitations. He looked forward to a future union with Edith as a haven of rest. Married to a woman whom he had loved long enough to take love for granted, a woman whose fidelity had been tested by time, whose constancy he need never doubt, for him the years would glide onward with easy pace to sober middle life, and even to the grey dignity of honoured age. But he, like Valentine, had been warned against the drama and passion of life. He was to be, not to act or to suffer.

And for a mere transient fancy, the charm of a pensive countenance, the romance of patient poverty, he had let his veins run liquid fire, his heart beat furiously. He was ashamed of his own inconsistency; and presently, seeing a hansom sauntering along under the trees with a horse that looked a good mover, he hailed the man, and asked if his horse were fresh enough to drive as far as Finchley. Naturally the reply was yes, and in the next minute he was being carried swiftly through the summer dust with his face to the north.

He had often meditated this drive to the northern suburb with his own horses, and then it had seemed to him that to approach the house in which Mr. Champion was lengthening out the lees of life would be an error in taste, although he and the dying man had been upon the friendliest terms ever since Edith's marriage. This afternoon he felt a curious eagerness to be with the woman to whom he had bound himself, a feverish anxiety which subjugated all scruples.

He drove to the house Mrs. Champion had hired for herself—a small villa, in a well-kept garden. It was past eight when he rang the

bell, and the lawn and flower-beds were golden in the sunset. He expected to find Edith Champion at dinner, and had made up his mind to dine with her, *tête-à-tête* perhaps, for the first time in their lives.

Dinner was out of the question, for the present, at any rate. One of the match footmen, whose faces he knew in Hertford Street, came strolling in a leisurely way across the lawn, pipe in mouth, to answer the bell, suddenly pocketed his pipe and changed his bearing on recognising Mr. Hillersdon, and informed him that Mrs. Champion was at Kendal House, and that Mr. Champion was very bad.

"Worse than usual, do you suppose?" asked Gerard.

"I'm afraid so, sir. Mrs. Champion came home at half-past seven, but a messenger came for her while she was dressing for dinner, and she just put on her cloak, and ran across the road without even a hat. I'm afraid it's the hend."

"Which is Kendal House?"

"I'll show you, sir."

The footman stalked out into the road with that slow and solemn stalk which is taught to

footmen, and which is perhaps an element in the trade-unionism of domestic service—a studied slowness of movement in all things, lest perchance one footman should at any time do the work of two. Mrs. Champion's footman was a person of highest quality, and was even now oppressed with a sense of resentment at having to perform his duties single-handed at Finchley, while his comrade was leading a life of luxurious idleness in Hertford Street.

He pointed out a carriage entrance in a wall a little further up the road, and on the opposite side of the way, and to this gate Gerard hurried, and entered a highly respectable enclosure, a circular lawn girt with gravel drive, shrubberies hiding the walls, and in front of him a stately square stone house with classic portico, and two wings, suggesting drawing-room and billiard-room.

The first glance at those numerous windows gave him a shock. All the blinds were down. It was over, he thought. Edith Champion was a widow.

Yes, it was over. The sober, elderly manservant who opened the door informed him that

Mr. Champion had breathed his last at five minutes to eight. Mrs. Champion was just in time to be present at his last moments. The end had been peaceful and painless.

Edith Champion came downstairs, accompanied by the doctor, while the servant was talking, her eyes streaming. She saw Gerard, and went across the hall to him.

"It is all over," she said agitatedly. "He knew me at the last—knew me and spoke my name, just as I thought he would. Thank God, I was there; I was not too late for that last word. I did not think I could feel it so much, after those long days and weeks of anticipation."

"Let me take you to your own house," Gerard said gently.

She was in a black lace dinner-dress, with a light summer cloak flung loosely about her, her white throat rising out of the gauzy blackness like a Parian pillar, her dark eyes drowned in tears, and tears still wet on her pale cheeks. All that was tender and womanly in her nature had been shaken by that final parting. If she had sold herself to the rich man as slaves are sold in an Eastern market he had been a most

indulgent master, and her slavery had been of the lightest.

The doctor attended her to the threshold, and she went out leaning on Gerard's arm. Even in the midst of her natural regret there was sweetness in the thought that henceforth she belonged to him. It was his privilege and his duty to protect her, to think for her in all things.

"You will telegraph to my husband's solicitor," she said to the doctor falteringly, as she dried her tears. "He will be the proper person to arrange everything with you, I suppose. I shall not leave the Laurels till after——"

"I understand," interrupted the doctor, saving her the pain of that final word. "All shall be arranged without troubling you more than is absolutely necessary."

"Good night," she said, offering her hand. "I shall not forget how kind and thoughtful you always were. He could not have been better cared for."

Gerard led her out of the formal enclosure where the conifers and evergreens were darkening under the shadows of night. The gate was open at the Laurels, and the stately footman was on

the watch for his mistress's return, his powdered head bared to the evening breeze. Within there were lights and the brightness of flowers, dinner ready to be served.

"You will take something, I hope?" said Gerard, when the butler announced dinner.

They had gone into the drawing-room, and she was sitting with her face hidden in her hands.

"No, no, I could not eat anything," and then to the butler, "Mr. Hillersdon will dine. You can serve dinner for him, and tell George to bring me some tea here."

"Then let me have a cup of tea with you," said Gerard. "I am no more in the mood for dining than you are."

This gratified her, even in the midst of her sorrows. Women have an exaggerated idea of the value which men set upon dinner, and no sacrifice propitiates them more surely than the surrender of that meal.

Edith Champion did not argue the point. She only gave a little sigh, and dried her tears, and became more composed.

"I think I did my duty to him," she said presently.

“Most thoroughly. You made him happy, which is more than many a wife can say about a husband she has adored,” answered Gerard.

The footman brought in the tea-table, and lighted the candles on the mantelpiece and piano, and drew the curtains, with an air of wishing to dispel any funereal gloom which the shadow of that dark event at Kendal House had spread over the room. He and the other servants had been talking about the funeral and their mourning already, speculating as to whether Mr. Champion had left legacies to such of his servants as had been with him “say a year,” concluded George, footman, who had been in the service fourteen months.

Mrs. Champion made a little motion of her hand towards the teapot, and George poured out the tea. She felt that the etiquette of grief would not allow her to perform that accustomed office. She sat still, and allowed herself to be waited upon, and sipped and sighed, while Gerard also sipped in pensive silence.

He was thinking that this was the second time within a very few hours that he was taking tea with Edith Champion, and yet what a gap those

few hours had cloven across his life. The woman he had loved so long, and to whom he had irrevocably pledged himself, was free from her bondage. There could be no longer doubt or hesitancy in their relations. A certain interval must be conceded to the prejudices of society ; and then, at the end of that conventional widowhood this woman, whom he had loved so long, would lay aside her weeds, and put on her wedding-gown, ready to stand beside him at the altar. For months he had known that Mr. Champion's end was imminent ; and yet to-night it seemed to him as if he had never expected the man to die.

The silence was growing oppressive before either the lady or her guest found speech. The footman had retired, leaving the tea-table in front of his mistress, and they were alone again.

"You will not remain in this house after the funeral, of course," said Gerard, having cast about for something to say.

"No, I shall leave England immediately. I have been thinking of my plans while you and I have been sitting here. I hate myself for my egotism ; but I could not go on thinking of—him. It would do no good. I shall not easily forget

him, poor fellow. His face and his voice will be in my thoughts for a long time to come—but I could not help thinking of myself too. It seems so strange to be free—to be able to go just where I like—not to be obliged to follow a routine. I shall go to Switzerland as soon as I can get ready. I shall take Rosa Gresham with me. She is always enchanted to turn her back upon that adorable parish of hers.”

“But why should you go away?”

“It will be best. If I were to stay in England you and I would be meeting, and now—now that he is gone people would rake up the past, and say ill-natured things about us. It will be far better that we should see very little of each other till the year of my widowhood is over. A long time, Gerard ; almost long enough for you to forget me.”

Her tone implied that such forgetfulness must needs be impossible.

“What if I refuse to submit to such a separation, even to propitiate Mrs. Grundy? We have treated that worthy personage in a very off-hand manner hitherto. Why should we begin to care about her?”

"Because everything is different now he is gone. While my husband approved of my life nobody could presume to take objection to anything I might do; but I stand alone now and must take care of my good name—your future wife's good name, Gerard!"

"How sweetly you put the question. But, my dear Edith, must we really be parted so long? Could people talk about us if you and I were living in the same town, seeing each other every day?"

"You don't know how ill-natured people can be. Indeed, Gerard, it will be better for both our sakes."

"Not for my sake," he said earnestly.

He had gone to Finchley that evening upon a sudden impulse, as if he had been flying from an unimagined peril. He had felt, vaguely, as if his first love were slipping away from him, as if an effort were needed to strengthen the old bonds; and now the woman who should have helped him to be true was about to forsake him—to sacrifice inclination and happiness to the babbling crowd.

"What can it matter how people talk of us?" he cried impetuously. "We have to think of

ourselves, and our own happiness. Remember how short life is, and what need we have to husband our brief span of years. Why waste a year, or half a year, upon conventionalities? Let me go with you wherever you go. Let us be married next week."

"No, no, no, Gerard. God knows, I love you, only too dearly; but I will not be guilty of deliberate disrespect to him who has gone. He was always good to me—kind and indulgent to a fault. I should have been a better wife, perhaps, if he had been a tyrant. I will not insult him in his grave. A year hence; a year from this day I shall belong to you!"

"And Mrs. Grundy will have no fault to find with you. 'Content to dwell in decencies for ever,' " quoted Gerard, with a touch of scorn. "Well, you must have your own way. I have pleaded, and you have answered. Good night. I suppose I shall be allowed to bid you good-bye at the railway station before you leave England."

"Of course. Rosa shall write to you about our plans directly they are settled. You will be at the funeral, Gerard, will you not?"

"Naturally. Once more good night."

They clasped hands, she tearful still, ready to break down again at any moment; and so he left her.

The hansom had waited for him, the horse's head in a nosebag, the driver asleep on his perch.

"Only a year, and you are mine as I am yours," mused Gerard, as he was driven westward. "But a year sometimes makes a wide gap in a life. What will it do in mine?"

CHAPTER II.

“FOR SOME MUST STAND, AND SOME MUST FALL
OR FLEE.”

MR. CHAMPION had been laid at rest in a brand new vault at Kensal Green for nearly a month, and his widow was at Interlachen, with her cousin, maid, and courier, excursioning mildly among the snow-peaks and glaciers, listening idly to Mrs. Gresham's interpretation of Mendelssohn, Chopin, and all the new Slavonic composers, reading Shelley, Keats, and Swinburne, and abandoning herself to a vague melancholy, which found relief in the solitude of everlasting hills, and the seclusion of private sitting-rooms at the hotel. From Interlachen Gerard Hillersdon received his sweetheart's lengthy and frequent letters, written in a fine, firm hand, on the smoothest paper, with a delicate perfume of

wood violets—letters descriptive of every drive and every ramble among the hills, letters meditative upon the poetry she had been reading, or the last German novel, with its diffuse sentimentality and its domestic virtues—letters which generally enclosed a little white woolly flower, plucked amidst perpetual snows; letters which did all that letters can do to bridge the distance between lovers. Gerard replied less lengthily, but with unfailing tenderness, to all those letters of June and July. He wrote from his heart, or he told himself that he was so writing. He wrote with a large panel portrait of his sweetheart upon his desk, in front of him, a portrait which met his eyes whenever he lifted them from his paper, a lifelike likeness of the beautiful face and figure, gorgeous in Court gown and mantle, a tiara on the imperial head, a riviere of diamonds upon the perfect neck; a costume whose splendour would have been enough for a princess of the blood royal, yet which seemed only in harmony with Edith Champion's beauty.

Sometimes between that face, with its grand lines, and classic regularity, there would come

the vision of another face, altogether different, yet no less beautiful—the ethereal loveliness of the Raffaele Madonna, the elongated oval cheek and chin and straight sharply-chiselled nose, the exquisite refinement of the pensive lips and delicate arch of the eyebrows over violet eyes, the pearly tints of a complexion in which there was no brilliancy of colour, no peach bloom, only a transparent fairness beneath which the veins about the temples and around the eyes showed faintly azure—an oval face framed in shadowy brown hair. With what a fatal persistence this image haunted him; and yet he had seen Hester Davenport only once since that afternoon at Chelsea, when the old man admitted him to the humble lodging-house parlour. Once only had he returned there, and that was to escort his sister, who was delighted to renew her acquaintance with the curate's beautiful daughter. That had happened three weeks ago, and Lilian and Hester had met several times since then—meetings of which Gerard had heard every detail.

And now the London season was drawing to its close and Lilian had to leave her brother's house in order to do her duty as an only daughter, and

accompany her father and mother to Royat, where the Rector was to take a course of waters, which was to secure him an immunity from gout for the best part of a year, until the "cure" season came round again and the London physicians had decided where he was to go. It would be Lilian's last journey as a spinster with her father and mother. She was to be married early in the coming year, and to take upon herself husband and parish—that parish of St. Lawrence the Martyr to which she had already attached herself, and whose schools, alms-houses, dispensary, night-refuge, orphanage, and reading-room were as familiar to her as the morning-room at Helmsleigh Rectory.

It was her last morning at Hillersdon House, and she was breakfasting *tête-à-tête* with her brother, a rare pleasure, as Gerard had been very erratic of late, rarely returning home till the middle of the night, and not often leaving his own rooms till the middle of the day. He had been drinking deep of the cup of pleasure, as it is offered to youth and wealth in the height of the London season; but pleasure in his case had not meant debauchery, and the only vice to

which late hours tempted him was an occasional hour's worship of the mystic number nine, or a quiet evening at piquet or poker. And in this drinking of the pleasure-chalice, he told himself that he was in no wise unduly consuming the candle of life, inasmuch as there was no pleasure which London could offer him that could stir his pulses or kindle the flame of passion. His heart beat no quicker when he held the bank at baccarat than when he sat over a book alone in his den. Time had been when an hour's play fired his blood, and set his temples throbbing; but to the millionaire loss or gain mattered little. There was only the pleasant exultation of success for its own sake, success which was no more delightful than if he had made a good shot at bowls on a summer lawn. He argued, therefore, that he was living soberly within himself, even when his nights were spent among the wildest young men in London, the frequenters of the after-midnight clubs, and the late restaurants.

"How nice it is to have a quiet half-hour with you, Gerard," said Lilian, as they began breakfast, he trifling with a devilled sardine, she attacking bread and butter and strawberries, while the

chef's choicest breakfast dishes remained untouched under their silver covers.

"Yes, dear, and how soon such quiet hours will be impossible. I shall miss you dreadfully."

"And yet, although we have lived under the same roof we have seen very little of each other."

"True, but it has been so sweet to know you were here, that I had always a sympathetic listener at hand."

Lilian answered with a sigh.

"You have given me no confidences, Gerard."

"Have I not. Believe me it has been from no lack of faith in your honour and discretion. Perhaps it was because I had nothing to tell!"

"Ah, Gerard, I know better than that. You have a secret—a secret which concerns Mrs. Champion. I know she is something more to you than a commonplace friend."

Gerard laughed to himself ever so softly at his sister's naivete. "What, has your penetration made that discovery, my gentle Lilian," he said. "Yes, Edith Champion and I are more than common friends. We were plighted lovers once, *dans le temps*, when we were both hopeful and penniless. Wisdom and experience intervened.

The young lady was induced to marry an elderly money-bag, who treated her generously, and to whom her behaviour was perfect. I changed from lover to friend, and that friendship was never interrupted, nor did it ever occasion the slightest uneasiness to Mr. Champion."

"And now that Mrs. Champion is a widow, free to marry for love——" questioned Lilian, timidly.

"In all probability she will become my wife—when her mourning is over. Shall you like her as a sister-in-law, Lilian?"

"How can I do otherwise. She has always been so kind to me."

"Ah, I remember. She took you to her dress-maker. I believe that is the highest effort of a woman's friendship."

"How lightly you speak of her, Gerard, and how coldly—and yet I am sure you care for her more than for any one else in the world."

"Naturally, and she deserves my affection, after having remained constant to me through the interregnum of a loveless marriage."

"She is just the kind of woman you ought to marry. With her beauty and good style she will

help you to maintain your position, and she will get rid of the friends whose influence I fear."

"Which of my friends, Lilian?"

"All those who come to this house, except Jack. Perhaps you will say Jack is no friend of yours, that you are not in touch with him, as you call it."

"He is my friend all the same. Granted that we differ in ethics and creed. I like him because he is straight, and strong, and true, and outspoken, and hearty—a man to whom I would turn in doubt and difficulty, in sickness or despair—a good, brave, honest man, Lilian, a man to whom I gladly give almost the dearest thing I have on earth, my only sister."

Tears sprang to Lilian's eyes at this praise of her lover. She could not answer in words for a few moments, but she stretched out her hand to her brother, and they sat hand clasped in hand.

"How happy I am," she faltered at last, "to have won him, and to have your love as well."

"And now tell me why you dislike my friends."

"Because they seem to me all false and hollow—full of flowery words and shallow wit—arrogant, superficial, making light of all good men's creeds,

dismissing noble lives and noble thoughts with a jest. Some of them are pleasant enough—Mr. Larose, for instance, with his elegant languor, and his rhapsodies about art and architecture—Mr. Gambier, with his schemes for new novels, which he has the impertinence to tell me will be unfit for me to read.”

“Poor Gambier, that is his harmless vanity. His most ardent desire is to be ranked with Zola and rejected by Mudie.”

“There is one of your friends whose presence fills me with horror, and yet he has more winning manners than any of them.”

“Indeed.”

“The man who laughs at everything. Mr. Jermyn.”

“Jermyn the Fate-reader.”

“He has never read my fate.”

“No, he refused to make an attempt. ‘There is a light in your sister’s countenance that baffles augury,’ he told me. ‘If I were to say anything about her it would be that she was created to be happy—but in a nature of that kind one never knows what happiness means. It might mean martyrdom.’ So you dislike Justin Jermyn?”

“It is not so much dislike as fear that I feel when I think of him. When I am in his society I can hardly help liking him. He interests and amuses me in spite of myself. But it is his bad influence upon you that I fear.”

“My dear Lilian, that is all mere girl’s talk. Bad influence, bosh! You don’t suppose that my experience of life since I went to the University has left my mind a blank sheet of paper, to be written upon by the first comer. Jermyn is a new acquaintance, not a friend, and his influence upon my life is nil. He amuses me—that is all—just as he amuses you, by his queer, gnomish ways and impish tricks. And now, before you go, tell me about Hester Davenport. You have been her friend for the last few weeks, and have lightened her burdens. What will she do when you are gone?”

“Oh, we shall write to each other. We are going to be friends all our lives, and when I am settled at the Vicarage we shall see each other often. She will come to St. Lawrence every Sunday to hear Jack preach.”

“That is something for her to look forward to, no doubt; but in the meantime she is to go on

with her drudgery, I suppose, without even the comfort of occasional intercourse with a girl of her own rank. Why could you not persuade her to accept an income from me, which would be, at least, enough to provide for her and her father?"

"I did not try very hard to overrule her decision, Gerard. In my heart I could only agree with her that she could take no such help from you, or from any one in your position. She could not sacrifice her independence by allowing herself to be pensioned by a stranger."

"I am not a stranger. I know her father's wretched story, and he was my father's curate. That does not made me a stranger. I don't think that either you or she can realise the position of a man with more money than he knows how to spend, who must inevitably squander a great deal of his wealth, waste thousands upon futile aims. Why should not such a man sink a few thousands to provide permanently for the comfort of a girl whose story has touched his heart? I would so settle the money that she would receive the income from year to year, without ever being reminded

of its source. There would be no humiliation, no sense of obligation; the thing once done upon my part would be done for ever. Why should it not be?"

"Because she will not have it so. Call her proud if you like—I admire her for her pride. She is content with the life she leads. She works hard, but she is her own mistress, and she is able to do her work at home, and to watch over the poor old father, who would inevitably fall back into his dreadful ways if she were to leave him too much alone, or if they were more prosperous, and he had the command of money. She has told me that their poverty is his salvation."

"A sorry prospect for a beautiful young woman, who under other circumstances might have society at her feet."

"She does not think of society, or consider herself a victim. You have no idea how simple-minded she is. I doubt if she even knows that she is lovely—or, if she does, she makes very light of her beauty. She told me that she had been poor all her life, and that nobody had ever made much of her, except her father."

“And you were able to do very little for her, it seems?”

“What you would think very little. I could not give her costly presents; her pride would have been up in arms at any attempt to patronise her. I gave her books and flowers; helped her to make that poor little lodging-house sitting-room as pretty and homelike as simple, inexpensive things could make it. We took some walks together in Battersea Park, and one lovely morning she went for a drive with me as far as Wimbledon, where we had a luncheon of buns and fruit on the common, just like two school-girls. She was as gay and bright that morning as if she had not a care in the world. I told her that she seemed happier than she had ever been at Helmsleigh, and she said that in those days she was oppressed by the knowledge of her father’s sad failing, which we did not know; but now that we knew the worst, and that he seemed really to have reformed, she was quite happy. Indeed she has the bravest spirit I ever met with!”

“Yes, she is full of courage; but it is hard, very hard,” said Gerard, impatiently: and then

he began to question Lilian about her own arrangements, and there was no further allusion to Hester Davenport; but there was a sense of irritation in Gerard's mind when he thought over his conversation with Lilian in the solitude of his own den.

"How feeble women are at the best," he said to himself, pacing to and fro in feverish unrest. "What petty notions of help, what microscopic consolations! A few books and flowers, a drive or a walk, a lunch of buns upon Wimbledon Common! Not one effort to take her out of that slough of despond—not one attempt to widen her horizon; a golden opportunity wasted, for Lilian might have succeeded where I must inevitably fail. If Lilian had been firm and resolute, as woman to woman, she might have swept away all hesitations, all foolish pride. But, no; she offers her humble friend a few flowers and a book or two, and hugs herself with the notion that this poor martyr is really happy—that the sewing machine and the shabby lodging are enough for her happiness—enough for one who should be a queen among women. Why, my housemaids are better off—better fed,

better lodged, with more leisure and more amusements. It is intolerable."

He had made up his mind that he would go no more to the little street in Chelsea. He had gone in the first place as an intruder, and had imposed himself upon the father's weakness, and traversed the daughter's wish, so plainly expressed to him on their first meeting. He hated himself for an act which he felt to be mean and unworthy, and he determined that after his formal visit as his sister's escort he would go there no more; yet two days after Lilian's departure an irresistible desire impelled him to try to see Hester again. He wanted to see if there were any justification for Lilian's optimistic view of the case—whether there were indeed peace and contentment in their humble home.

He went in the evening, at an hour when he knew Hester was to be found at home. However frugally she and her father might dine they always dined at seven, so that the old man should not suffer that uncomfortable reversal of all old habits which is one of the petty stings of poverty. The mutton chop or the little bit of fish which constituted his evening meal made a dinner as

easily as it would have made a supper, and Hester took a pleasure in seeing that it was served with perfect cleanliness and propriety, a result only attained by some watchfulness over the landlady and the small servant. The modest meal was despatched in less than half-an-hour, and at half-past seven Hester and her father were to be found enjoying their evening leisure—he with his pipe, she with a book, which she sometimes read aloud.

So Gerard found them upon a delicious summer evening, which made the contrast between Queen's Gate and the poorer district westward of Chelsea seem all the more cruel. There all coolness, and space and beauty, tall white houses, classic porticos, balconies brimming over with flowers, gaily-coloured blinds and picturesque awnings, the wide expanse of park and gardens, the cool glinting of water in the umbrageous distance; here long rows of shabby houses, where every attempt at architectural ornament seemed only to accentuate the prevailing squalor. And Hester Davenport lived here, and was to go on living here, and he with all his wealth could not buy her brighter surroundings.

He stopped at a bookseller's in the King's Road and bought the best copy of Shelley's poems which he could find, and at a florist's on his way he bought a large bunch of Marechal Niel roses, and with these gifts in his hand he appeared in the small parlour.

"As my sister is far away, I have ventured to come in her stead," he said, after he had shaken hands with father and daughter.

"And you are more than welcome, Mr. Hillersdon," answered the old man. "We shall miss your sister sadly. Her little visits have cheered us more than anything has done since the beginning of our troubles. I hardly know what we shall do without her."

"I am looking forward to next year, when Miss Hillersdon will be Mrs. Cumberland," said Hester, softly, "and when I am to help her with her parish work."

"Can you find time to help other people ; you who work so hard already ?"

"Oh, I shall be able to spare an afternoon now and then, and I shall be interested and taken out of myself by that kind of work. What lovely roses," she exclaimed, as he placed the bunch

upon the little table where her open book was lying.

"I am very glad you like them. You have other flowers, I see," glancing at a cluster of white and red poppies in a brown vase, "but I hope you will find room for these.

"Indeed, I will, and with delight. My poor poppies are put to shame by so much beauty."

"And I have brought—my sister asked me to bring you Shelley," he faltered, curiously embarrassed in the presence of this one woman, and laying down the prettily bound volume with conscious awkwardness.

"Did she really?" asked Hester, wonderingly, "I did not think Shelley was one of her poets. Indeed, I remember her telling me that the Rector had forbidden her to read anything of Shelley's beyond a selection of short poems. I dare say she mentioned some other poet, and your memory has been a little vague. Lilian has given me a library of her favourite poets and essayists."

She pointed to a row of volumes on one of the dwarf cupboards, and Gerard went over to look at them.

Yes, there were the poets women love—Wordsworth, Hood, Longfellow, Adelaide Proctor, Jean Ingelow, Elizabeth Barrett Browning—the poets within whose pages there is security from every evil image, from every rending of the curtain that shrouds life's darkest pictures, poets whose key-note is purity. No Keats, with his subtle sensuousness and heavy hot-house atmosphere. No Shelley, with his gospel of revolt against law, human and divine; no Rossetti, no Swinburne; not even Byron, whose muse, measured by the wider scope of latter-day poets, might wear a pinafore and feed upon the school-girl's bread and butter. The only giant among them all was the Laureate, and he was handsomely represented in a complete edition.

"I see you have no Shelley," said Gerard, "so my mistake was fortunate."

"But if Mr. Hillersdon would not let his daughter read Shelley——" began Hester.

"My worthy father belongs to a school that is almost obsolete—the school which pretends to believe that the human mind is utterly without individuality, or self-restraint, and that to read a lawless book is the first stage in a lawless

career. You have too much mental power to be turned to the right or to the left by any poet, be he never so great a genius. Not to have read Shelley is not to have tasted some of the loftiest delights that poetry can give us. I am opening a gate for you into an untrodden paradise. I envy you the rapture of reading Shelley for the first time in the full vigour of your intellect."

"You are laughing at me when you talk of the vigour of my intellect," she said gaily. "And as for your Shelley, I know in advance that I shall not like him as well as Tennyson."

"That depends upon the bent of your mind—whether you are more influenced by form or colour. In Tennyson you have the calm beauty and harmonious lines of a Greek temple; in Shelley the unreal splendour and gorgeous colouring of the new Jerusalem as St. John pictured it in his ecstatic dreams."

They discussed Hester's poets freely, and went on to the novelists and essayists with whom she was most familiar. Dickens and Charles Lamb were first favourites, and for romance Bulwer. Thackeray's genius she acknowledged, but considered him at his best disheartening.

"I think for people with whom life has gone badly Carlyle's is the best philosophy," she said.

"But surely Carlyle is even more disheartening than Thackeray," objected Gerard. "His gospel is the gospel of dreariness."

"No, no, it is the gospel of work and noble effort. It teaches contempt for petty things."

They talked for some time, Mr. Davenport joining in the conversation occasionally, but with a languid air, as of a man who was only half alive; and there was an undercurrent of complaining in all he said, which contrasted strongly with his daughter's cheerful spirit. He spoke more than once of his wretched health; his neuralgic pains, which no medical man could understand or relieve.

Gerard stayed till past nine, would have lingered even later if Hester had not told him that she and her father were in the habit of walking for an hour in the coolness of the late evening. On this hint he took up his hat and accompanied father and daughter as far as Cheyne Walk, where he left them to walk up and down in the summer starlight, very lonely in the great busy city, as it seemed

to him when he bade them a reluctant good night.

"How lovely she is, but how cold," he thought, as he walked homeward. "She is more like a picture than a living suffering woman. The old man's reformation sits uneasily upon him. Poor wretch, I believe he is longing for an outbreak—would sell half his miserable remnant of life for a short spell of self-indulgence."

Gerard pondered much upon Davenport's so-called reformation, in the sincerity of which he had scanty faith.

It was only because he was penniless that he was sober—the longing for alcohol was perhaps as strong as it had ever been. If any stroke of luck were to fill his pockets he would break out again as badly as of old. It was on this account, doubtless, that his daughter was content to live upon a pittance. Poverty meant the absence of temptation.

After this Gerard Hillersdon spent many an evening hour in the Davenport menage. He supplied Hester with books and choicest flowers, he took newspapers and hot-house grapes to the old man, who eat the grapes with a greedy

relish, as if he caught faint flavours of the vintages of Bordeaux and Burgundy in that English fruit. His visits and his gifts grew to be accepted as a matter of course. Books were Hester's one pleasure, and she often sat reading late into the night, although she was generally at her sewing-machine before eight o'clock in the morning. She was not one of those people who require seven or eight hours' sleep. Her rest and recreation were in those midnight hours when her father was sleeping, and she was alone with her books, sitting in a low wicker chair bought for a few shillings from an itinerant basket-maker, in the light of the paraffin reading-lamp, which her own skilful hands prepared every morning.

Gerard wondered at her placid acceptance of this life of toil and monotony. Again and again as he walked slowly up and down the shadowy promenade by the river he had sought by insidious questionings to discover the lurking spirit of revolt against that Fate which had doomed her to life-long deprivations. No word of complaint was ever spoken by those beautiful lips, pale in the moonlight. The London season

had passed her by, with all its pleasures, its smart raiment, and bustle of coaching meets and throng of carriages and riders in that meeting of the ways by Albert Gate whither her footsteps had so often taken her. She had seen women, infinitely inferior to herself in all womanly graces, set off and glorified by all the arts of costume and enamel, dyed hair and painted eyebrows, into a semblance of beauty, and queening it upon the strength of factitious charms: and yet no sense of this world's injustice had embittered her gentle spirit. Patience was the key-note of her character. If every now and then upon her lonely walks a man stopped as if spell-bound at a vision of unexpected beauty, or even turned to follow her, she thought only of his unmannerliness, not of her own attractions; and evil as are the ways of men few ever ventured to follow or to address her, for the earnest face, and the resolute walk, told all but the incorrigible snob that she was a woman to be respected. No, she had never rebelled against Fate. All that she asked from life was the power to maintain her father in comfort, and to prevent his return to those

degrading habits which had made the misery of her girlhood.

August was half over, West End London was a desert, and still Gerard lingered, Gerard the double millionaire, whom all the loveliest spots upon this earth invited to take his pleasure at this holiday season. His friends had bored him insufferably with their questions and suggestions before they set out upon their own summer pilgrimages. Those mysterious diseases of which one only hears at the end of the season had driven their victims in various directions, sympathetically crowding to the same springs, and sunning themselves in the same gardens. The army of martyrs to eczema and gout were boring themselves insufferably in Auvergne—the rheumatics were in Germany—the weak chests and shattered nerves were playing tennis or tobogganning at St. Moritz—the shooting men were in Scotland, the fishermen were in Norway. The idlers, who want only to wear fine clothes, do a little baccarat, and dabble in summer wavelets, were at Trouville, Etretat, Paramé, Dinard, or Dieppe. For any man deliberately to stay in London after the twelfth, was an act

so perverse and monstrous that he must needs find some excuse for it in his own mind. Gerard's excuse was that he was not a sportsman, had shot all the grouse he ever wanted to shoot, that he had seen all of the Continent that he cared to see, and that he felt himself hardly strong enough for travelling. The quiet of his own house, uninvaded by visitors, pleased him better than the finest hotel in Europe, the marble staircases and flower gardens of the Grand Bretagne at Belaggio, or the feverish *va-et-vient* of the comfortable Schweitzerhof at Lucerne. He wanted rest, and he got it in his own rooms, where his every caprice and idiosyncrasy found its expression in his surroundings.

Why should he leave London? He had invitations enough to have made a small octavo volume, if he had cared to bind and perpetuate that evidence of the worship which Society offers to Mammon, invitations worded in every form and phrase that can tempt man's vanity or minister to his self-esteem. Invitations to castles in Scotland, to moated granges in Warwickshire, to manor houses and shooting-boxes in York-

shire—to the wolds and moors of the north, to Dartmoor and Exmoor, to Connemara and Kerry, to every point of the compass in the British Isles, and even to chateaux in France, and hunting-lodges in Servia, Bohemia, Hungary, and heaven knows where. And every one of these invitations, many of them backed with playful allusions to daughters who for this or the other of his various accomplishments—tennis, chess, music, sketching—were especially eager for his society, every one of these invitations he knew was addressed not to himself but to his millions. This adulation filled him with unspeakable scorn ; nor if the invitations had been prompted by the most genuine friendliness would he have accepted one of them. Why should he fall in with other people's habits, or share in pleasures not originated by himself, he who could live his own life—carry his own retinue with him wherever he cared to go—charter the finest yacht that had ever been launched—hire the most luxurious of shooting boxes, castles, or chateaux—and take existence at his own measure, knowing no ruler but the caprice of the hour.

His answer to all these hospitable offers was a polite refusal. His health was too precarious to permit his enjoyment of visits which would otherwise be most agreeable. These refusals were written by his secretary and elicited much comment upon the insolence of the newly rich, and from the masculine recipients various unfriendly allusions to beggars on horseback.

Thus August drew towards a sultry close and the newspapers, no longer absorbed by Parliamentary reports, dressed themselves in the feathers of the screech owl and devoted a daily column to cholera, while the livelier and more discursive papers took up some topic of the hour, social or domestic, and opened their pages to a procession of letters upon the thrilling question of what we shall do with our empty sardine tins, or is the stage a safe profession for clergymen's daughters, or how to enjoy three weeks' holiday for a five-pound note. If Gerard Hillersdon had no longing for change from arid and overbaked streets he was perhaps the only person in town whose thoughts did not turn with fond longing towards shadowy vales and running streams, towards mountain or sea. Even Hester's resigned

temper was stirred by this natural longing. "How lovely it must be up the river in this weather," she said one evening when Gerard was strolling by her side under the trees of Cheyne Walk. Her father was with them. In all Gerard's visits he had never found her alone—not once had they two talked together without a listener, not once had their eyes met without the witness of other eyes. A passionate longing sometimes seized him as they paced soberly up and down in the summer moonlight, a longing to be alone with her, to hold her hands, to look into her eyes, and search the secrets of her heart with ruthless questioning—but never yet had that desire been gratified. Once on a sudden impulse he called at the Chelsea lodging-house in the afternoon, knowing that her father often spent an hour or two before dinner at the Free Library, but the landlady who opened the door told him that Miss Davenport was at her work, and must on no account be disturbed.

"You can at least tell her that I am here, and would be glad to see her, if only for a few minutes," said Gerard, and as he had given the woman more than one handsome *douceur*,

she went into the parlour and gave his message.

She returned almost immediately to say that Miss Davenport was engaged upon work that had to be finished that afternoon, and she could not leave her sewing-machine.

The click, click of the hated wheel was audible while the woman delivered her message, and Gerard left the threshold angry with Fate and life—angry even with the girl who had denied herself to him.

“It is pride, obstinacy, heartlessness,” he told himself, in his disappointment. “She knows that I adore her—that I can make her life one summer holiday; that I hold the master-key to all the world contains of beauty or of pleasure; and yet she goes on grinding that odious wheel. She would rather be the drudge of a German tailor than the ruler of my life.”

It was while he was in this embittered state of mind that he found himself face to face with Justin Jermyn, only a few paces from Mr. Davenport’s door.

“I thought you were in the Hartz Mountains,” he said, annoyed at the encounter.

“I have been there—have tramped with my knapsack on my back, like a student from Heidelberg or Gottingen, have drunk the cup of pleasure at roadside inns, dozed through a long summer day on the Brocken, and dreamt of Mephisto and the witches. But one day a fancy seized me to come back to London and hunt you up. I heard from Roger Larose that you had turned hermit, and were living secluded in the house he built for you—and I, who am something of the hermit myself, felt drawn to you by sympathy. Was that Gretchen’s wheel I heard just now, as I passed the house where you were calling?”

“I have no idea what you may have heard; but I should like to know what brings you to this particular neighbourhood.”

“Curiosity, and a fast hansom. I saw you driving this way as I stood waiting to cross the road at Albert Gate, with the intention of calling upon you. Useless to go to your house when you were driving away from it, so I hailed a hansom, and told the driver to keep yours in view—and so the man drove me to the corner of this street, where I alighted from my hansom just as you

dismissed yours. I passed the house yonder on the opposite side of the way while you were talking to the landlady, who took her own time in opening the door. You were too much absorbed to notice me as I went by, and through the open window I saw a girl working at a sewing-machine—a pale, proud face, which flushed crimson when the woman announced your visit.”

“And you expect me to endure the insolence of this espionage. Whatever your gifts may be, Mr. Jermyn, whether you excel most as prophet, necromancer, or private detective, I must beg you to exercise your talents upon other subjects, and to give me a wide berth.”

Justin Jermyn responded to this reproof with a hearty laugh. “Nonsense,” he said, “you pretend to be angry, but you are not in earnest. Nobody is ever angry with me. I am a privileged offender. I am everybody’s jester. Let me be your fool. Give me the privileges that emperors of old gave to their jesters. You will find me at worst a better companion than your own thoughts.”

“They are gloomy enough at the present moment,” said Gerard, subjugated at once by that

unknown influence which he had never been strong enough to resist.

He knew not what the force was by which this young man mastered him, but he knew that the mastery was complete. He was Justin Jermyn's *chose*—to be bent this way or that.

"You are unhappy," cried Jermyn. "You, with the one lever which can move the world under your hand. Absurd. If you have wishes, realise them. If any man stands in the way of your desire buy him. All men are to be bought—that is an old axiom of Prime Ministers—from Wolsey to Walpole—and almost all women. You are a fool to waste yourself upon unfulfilled desires, which mean fever and unrest. You have the *peau de chagrin*—the talisman of power—in your banking account."

"Yes, the *peau de chagrin*—we may take it as an allegorical figure to represent the power of money in an age of advanced civilisation—but while I possess the power I have to remember the penalty. With every passionate desire fulfilled the talisman shrinks, and the possessor's life dwindles."

"No, my friend, it is our unfulfilled desires

that shorten our lives—our ambitions never realised—our hopeless loves. With realisation comes satiety, and satiety means rest. The peril lies in the aching hunger of the wish, not in its fruition.”

CHAPTER III.

“A MAN CAN HAVE BUT ONE LIFE AND
ONE DEATH.”

OF all the men he knew, Justin Jermyn was the last whom Gerard would have deliberately chosen for a confidant and counsellor. He had an innate dread of the man, thought him false, tricky, and uncanny, half a charlatan, and half a fiend; and yet he was drawn towards him by such an irresistible magnetism, and was at this time so sorely in need of some friendly ear into which his egotism could pour its complainings, that, after trying to shake off Jermyn by absolute incivility, he ended by walking as far as Barnes Common with him, where they sat on a furzy hillock in the sweltering August afternoon, and smoked and talked in a lazy desultory fashion.

So far they talked only of people who were indifferent to both. Jermyn had a scathing tongue about men and women—but, being a man, was naturally most malignant in his estimate of the weaker sex.

“I believe the generality of men hate all women except the one woman they adore,” said Gerard, meditatively. “There is a natural antagonism in the sexes, as between dog and cat. Turn a little girl loose into a playground of small boys, and if it were not for fear of the schoolmaster, there would be no more of her after an hour’s play than of Jezebel when the dogs ate her. Every boy’s hand would be against her. They would begin by pulling her hair and tripping her up, and then the natural savage in them would go on to murder. Look at the way the Sepoys treated women in the Indian Mutiny! That devilish cruelty was only the innate hatred of the sex which asserted itself at the first opportunity. And your talk about Mrs. Fontenelle and the pretty Miss Vincent is only the civilised development of the same malignity.”

“Perhaps,” agreed Jermyn. “But for my own

part I am rather fond of women in the aggregate, as entomologists are fond of butterflies. I like them as specimens. I like to pin them down upon cork and study them, and make my guesses about their future, by the light of their antecedents."

"And you do not believe in the unassailable honour of good women?"

"Not in honour for honour's sake. There are women who elect to go through life with an unspotted reputation, for pride's sake, just as an Indian fanatic will hold his arms above his head until they stiffen and wither, for the sake of being looked up to by his fellow-men. But honour for honour's sake, honour in a hovel where there is no one to praise—honour in the Court of a Louis the Great or a Charles the Little—that kind of honour, my dear Hillersdon, is beyond my belief. Remember I am of the world worldly. My intellect and my opinions are perhaps the natural product of a society in its decadence."

"And do you think that a good woman—a woman whose girlhood has been fed upon all pure and holy thoughts, whose chosen type of her sex is the mother of Christ—do you think

that such a woman can survive the loss of reputation, and yet be happy ? ”

“ Assuredly, if she obtain a fair equivalent—a devoted lover, or a life of luxury, with a provision for her old age. The thorn among the roses of vice is not the loss of honour, but the apprehension of poverty. Anonyma, lolling on the silken cushions of her victoria, shivers at the thought that all the luxuries which surround her may be as short-lived as the flowers in the park borders, for a season, and no more. Believe me, my dear Hillersdon, we waste our pity upon these ladies when we picture them haunted by sad memories of an innocent girlhood, of their parish church, the school-house where they taught the village children on Sunday mornings, of broken-hearted parents, or sorrowing sisters. Ways and means are what these butterflies think about when their thoughts travel beyond the enjoyment of the hour. The clever ones contrive to save a competence, or to marry wealth. The stupid ones have their day, and then drift to the gutter. But conscience—regrets—broken hearts! Dreams, my dear Hillersdon, only dreams.”

A chance hansom took the two young men back to town, and on nearing Queen's Gate Gerard invited his companion to dine with him. There was nothing new or striking in Justin Jermyn's discourse, but its cheap cynicism suited Gerard's humour. When a man is set upon evil, nothing pleases him better than to be told that evil is the staple of life—that the wickedness which tempts him is common to humanity itself, and can not be wicked because it is incidental to human nature.

They dined *tête-à-tête* in the winter-garden, where the warm air rustled among the palm leaves, and the atmosphere was full of the scent of roses, climbing roses, standards, dwarfs, which filled all the available space, and made the conservatory a garden of roses. The sliding windows in the lofty dome were opened, and showed a sky, starlit, profound, and purple, as if this winter-garden near Knightsbridge had been some palm grove in one of the South Sea isles. The dinner was perfection, the wines the choicest products of princely vineyards; and Hillersdon's guest did ample justice to both cuisine and cellar, while Hillersdon himself ate very little, and drank only soda-water.

“Fortune, which has favoured you so highly in some respects, has not blest you with a fine appetite,” said Jermyn, when he had gone steadily through the menu, and had even insisted upon a second supply of a certain chaud-froid of ortolans.

“There is such a baneful sameness in food and wines,” answered Gerard. “I believe my *chef* is an artist who deserves the eminence he enjoyed with former masters—but his productions weary me. Their variety is more in name than in substance. Yesterday quails, to-day ortolans, to-morrow grouse. And if I live till next year the quails and ortolans and grouse will come round again. The earliest salmon will blush upon my table in January; February will come with her hands full of hot-house peaches and Algerian peas; March will offer me sour strawberries and immature lamb. The same—the same over and over again. The duckling of May—the green-goose, the turkey-poult, the chicken-turbot. I know them all. There is truer relish in a red herring which a working-man carries home to eat with his tea than in all the resources of a French cook, when once we

have run through his gamut of delicacies. I remember my first Greenwich dinner—rapture—the little room overlooking the river, the open windows and evening sunlight, the whitebait, the flounder-souché, the sweetbreads, the iced moselle, food for the Olympian gods! But after many seasons of Greenwich dinners, how weary and hackneyed is the feast.”

“You have possessed your millions little more than a year, and already you have learnt how not to enjoy,” said Jermyn. “I must compliment you upon your progress.”

“Ah, you forget, I knew all these things before I had my fortune—knew them in the days when I was only an umbra, knew them in other people’s houses. Money can buy hardly anything for me that has freshness or novelty, any more than it could for Solomon, and I have no Queen of Sheba to envy me my splendour until there is no more spirit in her. Nobody envies a millionaire his wealth nowadays. Millionaires are too common. They live in every street in Mayfair. To be worth anybody’s envy a man should have a billion.”

“You begin to find fault with the mediocrity

of your fortune?" said Jermyn, with his pleasant laugh at human folly. "A little more than a year ago you were going to destroy yourself because you were in pecuniary difficulties—harassed by tailors and bootmakers. In another year you will be charging the same revolver to end an existence that leaves you nothing to live for. Solomon was not so foolish. Indeed, I think that great king was simply the most magnificent humbug that the history of the world offers to the contemplation of modern thinkers—a man who could philosophise so exquisitely upon the vanity of human life, and yet drain the cup of earthly pleasures—sensual, artistic, intellectual—to the very dregs! Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; and, behold! the slave market sends its choicest beauties to the king. Vanity of vanities, and, lo! the ships come into port laden with apes and ivory, with Tyrean purple and the gold of Ophir, for the king; and the building of the mighty temple yonder on the holy hill affords a perpetual interest and an inexhaustible plaything for the man who calls the grasshopper a burden. I'll wager that in Jerusalem they called that gorgeous temple Solomon's

Folly, and laughed among themselves as the great king's litter went up the hill, with veiled beauty sitting in the shadow of the purple curtains, and little slippered feet just peeping out among the embroidered cushions. Solomon in all his glory! I think, Hillersdon, if I were as rich as you, the thing I should feel most keenly would be that my money could not buy me back one gleam of the glory of the past—not half an hour with the guerilla leader David, among the wild hills, not one glimpse of Jerusalem when Solomon was king, not a night with Dido, or a dinner with Lucullus. We may imitate that gorgeous past, but we can never recall it. Billions would not buy it back for us. All the colour and glory of life has faded from an earth that is vulgarised by cheap trippers. From Hounslow to the Holy Land one hears the same harsh, common voices. German and Yankee accents drown the soft Tuscan of the Florentine in the Via Tornabuoni, tramloads of Cockneys rush up and down the hills of Algeria, camel-loads of vulgarity from London and New York pervade the desert where Isaiah wandered alone beneath the stars.

The hill where the worshippers of Baal waited for a sign from their god, the Valley of Jehoshaphat, are as banal as Shooter's Hill or the Vale of Health. The spirit of romance has fled from our vulgarised planet, and not a miliad of golden sovereigns could tempt her back for an hour!"

"I should be content to let the past go, if I could be happy in the present. That is the difficulty."

"Oh, I am always happy. I have fancies, but no passionate longings. My only troubles are climatic. While I can follow the sunshine I am content."

"If you have finished your wine let us go to my den," said Gerard, who had allowed his companion's rodomontade to pass by him like the faint breath of evening wind among the palm leaves, while his own thoughts travelled in a circle. "We can't talk freely here. I feel as if there were listeners in the shadowy corners behind those tree ferns."

"To your den with all my heart."

They went upstairs to the room where Gerard's talisman was fixed against the wall, behind a

Japanese curtain. He had not lifted the curtain since the night when he first met Hester Davenport, and when the tremulous line which his pen made upon the paper showed him that a disturbing element had entered into his life.

To-night he flung himself into his accustomed chair wearily, and a heavy sigh escaped him, as he pushed aside the books upon the table in front of him, and looked at the face of his betrothed in the photograph.

Jermyn was walking round the room looking at everything with an amused air.

"So like my old rooms," he said, "I feel quite sorry as I look at the things. Mine are sold, dispersed, vanished into thin air. I gave up those old Inn chambers—too uncanny for a man of cheerful temperament. I have a *pied à terre* in Paris now."

"What part of Paris?"

"Ah, I never tell my address. That is one of my idiosyncrasies. But if ever I meet you on the boulevard after the theatres have closed, I will take you to my den to supper, and will give you Margot or Lafitte as good as the Madeira you liked that night in the old Inn. By Jove,

my image in black marble! How did you come by it? ”

The image was a bust of Pan, and the features and expression of the god were the features and expression of Justin Jermyn. Allow for the phantasy of goat's ears, and the bust was as fine a likeness of the Fate-reader as portraiture could have achieved under the happiest conditions.

“Who is the sculptor?” asked Jermyn, hovering over the bust with childish pleasure.

“It is an antique from Sir Humphrey Squander-ville's collection. I found it at Christie's the other day, and I bought it as the best substitute I could get for that black marble bust which I saw in your rooms.”

“You must be very fond of me, Hillersdon, to have set up my image in your sanctum.”

“Fond of you! Not in the least. I have a horror of you—but I like your society, as a man likes opium. It has a foul taste, and he knows it is bad for him; yet he takes it—craves for it—must have it. I could not rest till I had your likeness; and now that grinning mouth of yours is always there to mock at my heartache, my doubt, my despair. That broad smile of sensual

enjoyment, that rapture in mere animal life, serve me as a perpetual reminder of what a poor creature I am from the pagan point of view—how utterly unable to enjoy life from the Pantheist's standpoint, how conscious of man's universal heritage—death."

"‘Death is here and death is there,
Death is busy everywhere,’"

quoted Jermyn. "Cheerful poet, Shelley; an exquisite harper, but a good deal of his harping was upon one string—death, dust, annihilation. It would have been simply inconsistent if he had lived to be as old as Wordsworth. But why should my image," posing himself beside the bust, and laying his long white hand affectionately upon the sylvan god's crisp forelock, "remind you of dismal things? My prototype and I have the spirit which makes for cheerfulness?"

"Your very cheerfulness accentuates my gloom."

"Gloomy! With youth and good looks, and ninety thousand a year."

"More than enough for happiness, perhaps, if I had the freehold; but I am only a leaseholder, and I know not how short my lease may

be. I have pretty good reason to know that it is not a long one. Yes, I know that, Justin Jermyn. I know that these things belong to me as the dream-palace belongs to the dreamer who fancies himself a king."

"Make the most of your opportunities while they last. To be as rich as you are—and to be young—is to command the world. There is not a flower in the garden of life that you cannot pluck."

"You are wrong. I am tied and hampered. I see before me one—and only one—chance of supreme happiness, and yet I dare not grasp it."

And then in a gush of confidence, in the passionate egotism that must talk of self, he told this man whom he distrusted the inmost secrets of his heart—told him how he had been moved by the sight of Hester's face on the platform in the concert-hall, and how from that night he had struggled in vain against the attraction which drew him towards her. He told Jermyn everything—his intrusion upon her life, albeit he knew her desire to avoid all friends of the past—told of those quiet hours in the humble lodging, those unalarming gifts of flowers and books—

told of those slow pacings by the river, with the old father always at her side—pouring out his soul to this man whom he doubted and feared as freely as a girl tells her story of hopeless love to a trusted sister.

“We have never been alone together since that first night in Eaton Square. I have never dared even to hold her hand in mine with a lingering clasp, and yet when our hands touch there is a fire that runs through my veins, till heart and brain are fused in that passionate flame, and I can scarce shape the words that bid her good-bye. Our talk has been only of commonest things. I have never by look or word dared to express my love—and yet I think she knows I love her. I think that when my heart leaps at the sound of her voice or the touch of her hand her heart is not cold. I have seen her lips tremble in the faint evening light when we have walked side by side under the trees. I have felt that there was eloquence in her silence, in her faltering replies. Yes, I know she loves me.”

“What more do you want—knowing that? Are you going to leave her at her sewing-

machine, when you can make her life one blissful holiday ? ”

“ She is not a woman to be had for the asking. Would you advise me to fling every worldly consideration to the winds, and marry her ? ”

“ You cannot marry everybody,” replied Jermyn, with a practical air, “ and I take it you are irrevocably pledged to the lady yonder,” pointing to the gold and lapis lazuli frame—a gem of jeweller’s work—on the writing-table.

“ Yes, I am pledged to her.”

“ In any case the world expects you to marry her—and it will go rather hard with her—from a society point of view, if you don’t. But perhaps you care very little what the world says about Mrs. Champion ? ”

“ I care very much. I am bound to care for her reputation, and for her feelings. Till she, of her own free will, release me, I am bound to her by every tie that can bind a man of honour.”

“ So ! ” exclaimed Jermyn, “ that means a good deal.”

“ It means not one syllable to Edith Champion’s discredit,” answered Hillersdon, hotly. “ She was a faithful wife to her husband, and I knew how

to respect her position as his wife, although I had been her adoring lover. During the three years of her married life we were friends, and friends only. It may be that we both counted on the days when she would be free, and when the thread of the old story might be taken up again just where we dropped it."

"And now she is free, and you seem hardly to have taken up the thread."

"It is her fault," said Hillersdon, angrily. "She is beautiful, generous, loves me with all her heart; but she is fettered by petty laws which brave women laugh at. She ran away from me just when my salvation lay in her society. I wanted to hold fast by my first love. I wanted to live all my life in her company, to lure back the loves and graces that had fluttered away, to forget that there was another lovely or lovable woman upon this earth; but she told me that people would talk, and that it was better we should see very little of each other until the period of conventional grief was past, and I could decently make Champion's widow my wife. So she is sketching snow-peaks at Murren while——"

"While you are over head and ears in love with Hester Davenport."

"It is more than love; it is possession. My world begins and ends with her. I tried to run away, tried to start for Switzerland, to follow my betrothed to her mountain retreat, in defiance of her objection; but it was a futile effort. I was at the station; my servant and portmanteau were on the platform; and at the last moment my resolution failed. I could not place myself beyond the possibility of seeing the face I worship, of hearing the voice that thrills me."

"And you are content to go on seeing the lovely face and hearing the thrilling voice in the presence of a third person? Isn't that rather like being in love with a ward in Chancery, and courting her in the presence of the family lawyer? Why don't you get rid of the old man?"

"That's not as easy as you suppose. You saw me sent away from Hester's door to-day. She will not receive me in her father's absence, and I am not such a cad as to force myself upon her seclusion. I behaved badly enough in the first instance when I acted in direct opposition to her wish."

“To her alleged wish. Do you think a woman is ever quite candid in these cases, either to her lover or to herself? Look at Goethe’s Gretchen, for instance, somewhat snappish when Faust addresses her in the street, but a few hours after, in the garden! What had become of the snappishness? She is ocean deep in love, ready to throw herself into the lover’s arms. I can’t conceive how you can have gone on with this idle trifling, like an undergraduate smitten by a boarding-school miss. You with your millions, your short lease of life, your passionate desire to make the most of a few golden years. Strange to what hopeless fatuity love can reduce its victim! Get rid of the old father, make a clean sweep of him, and then at least the coast will be clear, and you need not confine your love-making to half-an-hour’s crawl upon the Embankment.”

“How get rid of him? There’s the difficulty. He has been reformed by her care, and it is the business of her life to make his declining years happy. Nothing would induce her to part with him.”

“Perhaps not; but very little would induce him to part with her. Do you suppose that he

is not tired of his present life? Do you know what reform means in the habitual drunkard? It means deprivation that makes existence a living death. It means a perpetual craving, a thirst as fierce as that which racks the parched traveller in the African desert, the perishing sailor after a week scorched upon a raft in mid-ocean: only it is the thirst for alcohol, for fire instead of water. To his daughter this poor wretch may pretend resignation, but you may be sure he is miserable, and will resume his darling vice at the first opportunity."

"And you would suggest that I should find the opportunity, that I should fling him back into the Tophet from which his daughter plucked him. No, Jermyn, I am not so vile as that."

"I suggest nothing. Only if you want to win the daughter you must get the father out of the way; unless, indeed, you prefer to take the other line—throw over Mrs. Champion and make a formal offer for Miss Davenport's hand. No doubt the old man would be very proud of you as a son-in-law, though you might have some occasion to be ashamed of him as a father-in-law when the opportunities of an establishment

like this should lure him back to his old habits."

"I have told you that I cannot break with Edith."

"And you will marry her next year, while you are still passionately in love with another woman?"

"I dare not think of next year. I may not live till next year. I can think only of the present, and of the woman I love."

"You are wise. A year is a long time, measured by a passion like yours. You have offered Davenport and his daughter an income through your sister. You have acted with most admirable delicacy, and yet your offers have been rejected. Have you ever offered Davenport money, directly—with the golden sovereigns or the crisp bank-notes in your hand?"

"Never. I would not degrade him by any such offer. And I believe that he would reject any gift of that kind."

"A gift perhaps, but not a loan. A man of that kind will always take your money if you humour his pride by pretending to lend it to him. Or there are other ways. He is a good

classic, you say, or was so once. Let him write a book for you. A literary commission would be an excuse for giving him ample means for enjoying his evenings in his own way, and then your moonlit walks upon the Embankment would have the charm which such walks have when heart answers to heart."

"What a villain I should be if I were to take your advice and undo the work to which that heroic girl has devoted herself for the brightest years of her girlhood—those years which for the young lady in society mean a triumphant progress of dances and tennis-tournaments, and pretty frocks and adulation, a pathway of flowers. She has given all the brightness of her youth to this one holy aim; and you would have me undo her work."

"My dear fellow, the end is inevitable. I tell you that for the habitual drunkard there is no such thing as reformation. There is the semblance of it, while the sinner is cut off from the possibility of sin; but backsliding comes with opportunity, and the reaction is so much the more violent because of that slow agony of deprivation through which the sinner has been

passing. I no more believe in Mr. Davenport's reform than the Broad Church believes that Joshua stopped the sun."

The conversation drifted into other channels. They discussed that great problem of man's destiny which is always being argued in some form or other. They asked each other that universal riddle which is always being answered and is yet unanswerable. In this line of argument Justin Jermyn showed an impish facility for shifting his ground; and at the end of an hour's argument Hillersdon hardly knew whether he was full of vague aspirations and vague beliefs in purer and better worlds beyond this insignificant planet, or whether his creed was blank negation.

It was late when they parted, and after the man himself was gone Gerard Hillersdon sat for a long time face to face with the marble image, the sly smile, the curious sidelong glance of the long narrow eyes seeming to carry on the argument, which the living lips had dropped, to strange and wicked conclusions.

"Wealth without limit," mused Gerard, "and so little power to enjoy—so brief a lease of life.

Why if I were sure of living to eighty or ninety I should still think it hard that the end must come—that it is inevitable—foreshadowed in the freshness of life's morning; stealing nearer and nearer with the ripening noon; hurrying with ever quickening pace in the twilight of life's evening, when the last sun-rays gild an open grave. Oh, that inevitable end—bane of every life, but most hideous where wealth makes existence a kind of royalty. I shudder when I read the wills of triple or quadruple millionaires. The riches remain—a long array of figures, astounding in their magnitude—and the man who owned all that gold is lying in the dark, and knows the end of all things.”

He went over to the wall against which he had affixed his talisman, drew aside the curtain, and then stepped quickly back to the table and dipped his pen in the ink. It was the same large broad-nibbed pen with which he had drawn the last line upon the night after his interview with Hester Davenport. He dashed his pen upon the paper in a fury, and drew an inner line with one hurried sweep of his wrist. If determination could have assured firmness that line would have

been bold and strong as Giotto's O; but the tracing was even weaker than the last, and might have been the effort of a sick man, so feebly did the line falter from point to point.

"Dr. South and Justin Jermyn are right," thought Gerard. "It is passionate feeling that saps the life of a man—most of all a hopeless passion—most of all a struggle between honour and inclination. I will see South to-morrow, and if he tells me the shadows are deepening upon the dial—if——"

The sentence remained unfinished even in his own mind. He spent a restless night, broken by brief slumbers and long dreams—vivid dreams in which he was haunted by the image of Nicholas Davenport, under every strange and degrading aspect. In one dream he was in his father's church at evensong in the quiet summer evening. He heard the organ and the voices of the village choir in the closing phrases of his mother's favourite hymn, "Abide with me:" and amidst the hush that followed the Amen he saw Nicholas Davenport lolling over the worn velvet cushions of the old-fashioned pulpit, gesticulating dumbly, mad with drink, but voiceless. There

was no sound in the church after that tender closing phrase of the hymn. All that followed was silence; but as he looked at that degraded figure leaning out of the pulpit the church changed to the pit of hell, and the village congregation became an assembly of devils, and on the steps of Satan's throne stood a figure like Goethe's Mephistopheles, and the face under the little red cap with the cock's feather was the face of Justin Jermyn.

There was nothing strange in the fact that he should so dream, for he had long ago in his own mind likened the Fate-reader to Goethe's fiend.

Gerard drove to Harley Street before ten o'clock next morning, and was lucky in catching Dr. South, who was in London, *en passant*, having finished his own cure at Homburg, and being on the point of starting for a holiday at Braemar.

There were no patients in the waiting-room, as the doctor was supposed to be out of town, and on sending in his card Gerard was at once admitted to the consulting-room.

Dr. South looked up from his pile of newly-opened letters with a pleasant smile.

“My little patient of the Devonshire Rectory,” he said cheerily; and then, with a keen look and a changed tone, he said, “But how is this, Mr. Hillersdon, you are not looking so well as when you were here last. I’m afraid you have been disregarding my advice!”

“Perhaps I have,” Gerard answered gloomily. “You told me that in order to spin out the thin thread of my life I must only vegetate, I must teach myself to become a human jelly-fish, without passions or emotions, thought or desire.”

“I did not forbid pleasant emotions,” said Dr. South; “I only urged you to avoid those stormy passions which strain the cordage of the human vessel, and sometimes wreck her.”

“You urged that which is impossible. To live is to feel and to suffer. I have not been able to obey you. I am passionately in love with a woman whom I cannot marry.”

“You mean that the lady is married already?”

“No; but there are other reasons——”

“If it is a question of social inequality, waive it, and marry. You cannot afford to be unhappy. The disappointment which another man would get over in a year, might in your case have a

fatal effect. You are not of the temper which can live down trouble."

"Tell me, frankly and ruthlessly, how long I have to live."

"Take off your coat and waistcoat," said the doctor quietly, and then, as his patient obeyed, he said, "I should be an impudent empiric if I pretended to measure the sands in the glass of life, but I can, if you like, tell you if your chances now are any worse than when you were with me last year. I remember your case perfectly, and even what I said to you at that time. I was especially interested in you as one of my little patients who had faith enough to come back to me in manhood. Now let me see," and the thoughtful head was bent to listen to that terrible tell-tale machinery we all carry about with us, ticking off the hours that remain to each of us in this poor sum of life. The downward bent brow was unseen by the patient, or he might have read his doom in the physician's countenance. When Dr. South looked up his features wore only the studied gravity of the professional aspect.

"Well," questioned Hillersdon, when the aus-

cultation was finished, "am I much worse than when I was here last?"

"You are not any better."

"Speak out, for God's sake," cried Gerard, roughly. "I—I beg your pardon, doctor, but I want the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, no making the best of a bad case. What is the outlook?"

"Bad."

"Shall I live a year—two—three years? How much do you give me?"

"With care—extreme care—you may live some years yet. Nay, I do not say that you might not last ten years; but if you are reckless the end may come quickly. Worry, agitation, fretting of any kind may hasten your doom. I am sorry to be obliged to tell you this."

"I thank you for having told me the truth. It settles one question, at least. I shall try to be happy my own way."

"Marry the woman you love, even if she is a housemaid," said the doctor, kindly, "and let her make your life happy in some quiet retreat, far from the excitements and agitations of the world of fashion or politics. You will go to the South,

of course, before the winter. I should recommend Sorrento or Corsica. Your wealth will surround you with all the luxuries that make life easy wherever a man has to live."

CHAPTER IV.

“HE IS THE VERY SOUL OF BOUNTY.”

GERARD HILLERSDON left Harley Street almost persuaded to break faith with the woman he had loved for more than three years, and offer himself to the woman he had loved less than three months. But that one word “almost” lost the early Christian Church a royal convert, and Gerard had not quite made up his mind to marry Nicholas Davenport’s daughter.

“So short a lease of life—and were I but happy with such a wife as Hester I might prolong my span to the uttermost,” he told himself, and then that advocate of evil which every worldly man has at his elbow whispered, “Why marry her, when your wealth would enable you to make so liberal a settlement that she need never feel the disadvantage of a false position. Win her for your

mistress, cherish and hide her from the eye of the world. To marry her would be to bring a drunken madman into the foreground of your life—to cut off every chance of distinction in the few years that may be left to you. A man in your position can be true to Esther without renouncing Vashti. And your Vashti has been loyal and constant. It would be the act of a villain to break faith with her.”

As if to accentuate that evil counsel he found a letter from Vashti waiting for him on his study table—a letter upon which Vashti’s image was smiling, beautiful in court plumes and diamonds. There was nothing new in her letter, but it stabbed him where he was weakest, for the writer dwelt fondly upon her trust in him, and upon that happy future which they were to lead together.

He dawdled away the summer noontide in his garden, smoking and dreaming, and he drove to Rosamond Road, Chelsea, at the hour when he knew he was likely to find Nicholas Davenport alone. His horses and stablemen had been idle of late, as he always employed a hansom when he went to Chelsea—and the inquiry, “would

the horses be wanted any more to-day?" was generally answered in the negative.

He found the old man dozing in his arm-chair, with the *Standard* lying across his knees. He looked pale and worn, the mere wreck of a man, his silvery hair falling in loose wisps over the high, narrow forehead. There were fresh flowers in the room, and all was exquisitely neat, from the books upon the dwarf cupboard to the muslin cover of the sewing-machine. Gerard seldom entered that room without being reminded of Faust's emotion in Gretchen's modest chamber—where, in the gentle maiden's absence, he felt her spirit hovering near him, her pure and innocent mind expressed in the purity and neatness of her surroundings.

He had time to glance round him, and to recall that scene—Ein kleines, reinliches Zimmer—before Nicholas Davenport started up out of his light slumber, and shook hands with him.

"This is uncommonly kind of you," said the old man. "These summer afternoons are infernally long when Hester is out of the way. And the papers are as dull as ditchwater—politicians on the stump all over the country—one Parliamentary

machine thrashing his bundle of political corn at Leeds on Tuesday, and another machine thrashing the very same bundle of facts and fallacies, and prophecies that never come true, at Halifax! And so the ball rolls on."

"I dare say if we had lived at Athens we should have found politics just as great a bore, and orators no less windy," answered Gerard, lightly. "But you are not looking well, Mr. Davenport."

"I am feeling a little low to-day—the weather, perhaps," and here the old man sighed, and began to fold up his newspaper with the tremulous movement of hands that had never recovered the firmness or repose lost under the influence of alcohol. "To be candid with you, my dear Hillersdon, I am suffering from a profound misapprehension in one of the best of creatures. My daughter is an angel. Her devotion to me"—here the ready tears stole down his withered cheeks—"is beyond all praise; but she is a woman, and a young woman, and she doesn't understand my constitution, or the circumstances of my life. She has taken up temperance as a craze, and she thinks she is doing me a kindness

by depriving me of every form of stimulant. She hugs herself with the idea that she has saved me from destruction, and she cannot see that she is reducing me to a state of weakness, mental and physical, which must result in imbecility or death."

He was so earnest, he looked so reduced and wretched a being that Gerard was inclined to believe him, and to doubt whether Hester's system might not be a mistake.

"It is hard for you, I dare say, to make so complete a change in your habits," he said doubtfully.

"Her mistake is in insisting upon total abstinence. I have not forgotten the past, Mr. Hillersdon. I have not forgotten the degradation and disgrace which I brought upon myself in your father's church ; but that unhappy exhibition was the outcome of long months of agony. I had been racked by neuralgia, and the only alleviation of my pain was the use of chloral or brandy. I have been free from neuralgic pain of late. My poor Hester is very careful of my diet, and takes the utmost care of my health after her own lights ; but she cannot see how

weak and depressed I am. She cannot understand the mental misery which a glass of sound port, twice a day, might cure."

"Surely Miss Davenport would not object to your taking a glass of port after your luncheon and your dinner?"

"You don't know her, my dear friend," said Davenport, shaking his head. "Women are always in extremes. She would begin to cry if she saw me with a glass of wine in my hand, would go on her knees to ask me not to drink it. She has taken it into her head that the least indulgence in that line would bring about a return to habits of intemperance, which I can assure you were never a part of my nature."

"I must talk to Miss Davenport, and induce her to let me send you a few dozen of fine old port, Cockburn's '57, for instance."

The old man's eyes gleamed as he heard the offer.

"You may talk to her," he said, "but she won't give way. She has made up her mind that my salvation depends upon living in her way. It is a hard thing for a man of my age to depend for subsistence upon a daughter's manual

labour, to see a lovely girl wearing out her life at vulgar drudgery, and never to have sixpence in my pocket—hardly the means of buying a newspaper. She doles out her pence, poor child, as if they were sovereigns. Women have such narrow notions about money.”

There was a silence of some minutes, during which Davenport nearly fell asleep again, and then Gerard said quietly—

“Why should you depend upon your daughter, even for pocket-money? Why not do something for yourself?”

“What can I do? I have tried to get copying work, but I could not write a clerk’s hand. My penmanship was too weak and illegible to be worth even the starvation wages paid for that kind of work.”

“I was not thinking of so poor an occupation. Have you tried your hand at literature?”

“I have, in more than one line, though I had no vocation, and wrote slowly and laboriously. The articles I sent to the magazines all came back, ‘Declined with thanks.’ My daughter was the poorer by so many quires of Bath post and so many postage stamps.”

“You tried a wrong line, I dare say. Beginners in literature generally do. You are a good classic, I know.”

“I was once, but the man who took his degree at Oxford thirty years ago is dead and gone.”

“Men don’t forget Homer or Virgil when they have once loved them with the scholar’s fervour.”

“Forget, no. One does not forget old friends. Quote me any line from Horace or Virgil—the most obscure—and I will give you the context. Those two poets are interwoven with the fabric of my brain. I used also to be considered a pretty good critic upon the Greek Dramatists. I once got half way through a translation of *Œdipus*, which some of my contemporaries were flattering enough to persuade me to finish. I laid the manuscript aside when I began parish work, and heaven knows what became of it.”

“The world has grown too frivolous to care for translations of Sophocles,” replied Gerard, “but I believe there is room for a new Horace—that is to say a new version of some of the lighter satires—a version which should be for the present epoch what Pope’s was for the time of Queen Anne; and I feel that it is in me to attempt the thing if

I had the aid of a competent scholar—like yourself.”

The old man’s face lighted up with feverish eagerness.

“Surely your own Latin——” he began tremulously.

“Has grown sadly rusty. I want a new version of my favourite satires—a verbatim translation, reproducing the exact text in clear, nervous English, and upon that I could work, giving the old lines a modern turn, modulating the antique satire into a modern key. Will you collaborate with me, Mr. Davenport? Will you undertake the scholarly portion of the work?”

“It is a task which will delight me. The very idea gives me new life. Which of the satires shall we start with?”

“Shall we say the ninth in the first book? It gives such a fine opportunity for the castigation of the modern bore.”

“Capital. I am proud to think that with so many translations ready to your hand you should prefer a new one by me.”

“I want to avoid all published versions,”

answered Gerard, plausibly; as he opened a note-case.

The old man watched him with greedy eyes, and the weak lips quivered faintly. Did that note-case mean payment in advance?

The question was promptly answered. Gerard took out a couple of folded notes, and handed them to his future collaborator.

"You must allow me to give you two hundred pounds on account," he said. "You will then at least have the feeling that your scholarship is worth something, and that you are not wholly dependent on your daughter's labour."

The old man fairly broke down, and burst into tears.

"My dear young friend, your delicacy of feeling, your generosity overcome me," he faltered, clutching the notes with shaking fingers, "but I cannot—I cannot take this money." His hold of the notes tightened involuntarily as he spoke, in abject fear lest he should have to give them back. "I suspect your proposed translation is only a generous fiction—devised to spare me the sense of humiliation in accepting this munificent honorarium. I own to you that the work you

propose would be full of interest for me. I perceive the opportunities of those satires—treated as freely as Pope treated them—the allusions, political, social, literary—and to a writer of your power—who have made your mark in the very morning of life by a work of real genius—the task would be easy.”

“You will help me, then?” said Gerard, his hollow cheek flushing with a hectic glow.

“With all my heart, and to the utmost of my power,” answered Davenport, slipping the notes into his waistcoat-pocket as if by an automatic movement. “Without conceit I think I may venture to say that for the mere verbal work you could employ no better hack.”

“I am sure of that, and for much more than merely verbal work. And now, good day to you, Mr. Davenport. It is about your daughter’s time for coming home, and she won’t care to find a visitor here when she comes in tired after her walk.”

“Yes, she will be here directly,” answered the old man, starting as with some sudden apprehension, “and on second thoughts I would rather you did not tell her anything about our plans until

they are carried out. When your book is published she will be proud, very proud, to know that her old father has helped in so distinguished a work; but in the meantime if you changed your mind, and the book were never finished, she would be disappointed; and then, on the other hand, I should not like her to know that I had so much money in my possession."

All this was faltered nervously, in broken sentences, while Mr. Davenport followed his patron to the door, and showed him out, eagerly facilitating his departure.

Gerard had dismissed his cab on arriving, and he walked slowly away towards the river, carefully avoiding that road by which Hester was likely to return. He was pale to the lips, and he felt like a murderer.

CHAPTER V.

“SO, QUIET AS DESPAIR, I TURNED FROM HIM.”

GERARD called in Rosamond Road on the following evening at the hour when he had been accustomed to find Mr. Davenport reposing after his comfortable little dinner, and his daughter reading to him. To-night the open window showed him Hester sitting alone in a despondent attitude, with an unread book on the table before her.

She came to the door in answer to his knock.

“My father is out,” she said. “He did not come home to dinner. He went out early in the afternoon while I was away, and he left a little note for me, saying that he had to go into London to meet an old friend. He did not tell me the friend’s name, and it seems so strange, for we have no friends left. We have drifted away from all old ties.”

"May I come in and talk with you?" Gerard asked. "I am so sorry you should have any cause for uneasiness."

"Perhaps I am foolish to be uneasy, but you know—you know why. I was just going for a little walk. It is so sultry indoors, and we may meet him." She took her hat from a peg in the passage, and put it on. "We are not very particular about gloves in this neighbourhood," she said.

He perfectly understood that she would not receive him in her father's absence, that even in her fallen estate, a work-girl among other work-girls, she clung to the conventionalities of her original sphere; and that it would not be easy for him to break through them.

They walked to the end of Rosamond Road almost in silence, but on the Embankment, with the dark swift river flowing past them, and the summer stars above, she began to tell him her trouble.

"You know how happy I have been," she said, "in a life which many girls of my age would think miserable and degraded."

"Miserable, yes; degraded, no. The most

feather-headed girl in England, if she knew your life, would consider you a heroine."

"Oh, please don't make so much out of so little. I have done no more than hundreds of girls would do for a dear old father. I was so proud and happy to think that I had saved him—that he was cured of that fatal vice—and now, now I am full of fear that since yesterday, somehow or other, he has obtained the means of falling back into the old habit—the habit that wrecked him."

"What makes you fear this?"

"He insisted upon going out last night after dinner. He was going to the Free Library to look at the August magazines. I offered to go there with him. We used to read there of an evening in the winter, but since the warm weather began we have not done so. I reminded him how hot the reading-room would be with the gas, but he was unusually eager to go, and I could not hinder him. The worst sign of all was that he did not like my going with him, and when we had been sitting there for half-an-hour he seemed anxious to get rid of me, and reminded me of some work which he knew I had to finish before this morning. But for that work I should have

stayed with him till he came home; but I could not disappoint my employer, so I left my father sitting engrossed in 'Blackwood,' and I hoped all would be well. He promised me to come straight home when the library closed, and he came home about the time I expected him, but one look in his face, one sentence from his lips told me that by some means or other he had been able to get the poison which destroys him."

"Are you not exaggerating the evil in your own imagination?" asked Gerard, soothingly. "After all, do you think that a few glasses too much once in a way can do your father any harm? He has seemed to me below par of late. He really may suffer from this enforced abstinence."

"Suffer! Ah, you do not know, you do not know! I may seem hard with him, perhaps, but I would give my life to keep him from that old horror—that madness of the past, which degraded a gentleman and a scholar to the level of the lowest drunkard in London. There is no difference—the drink madness makes them all alike. And now that some one has given him money all my care is useless. I cannot think who can have

done it. I don't know of any so-called friend to whom he could apply."

"His letter tells you of an old friend——"

"Yes! It may be some one who has returned from abroad—some friend of years ago who knows nothing of his unhappy story, and cannot guess the harm that money may do."

"Pray do not be too anxious," said Gerard, taking her hand and lifting it to his lips.

She snatched the small cold hand away from him indignantly.

"Pray don't," she said. "Is this a time for idle gallantry, and to me of all people—to me who have to deal only with the hard things of this life."

"No, Hester, but it is a time for love—devoted love—to speak. You know that I love you."

He took the poor little gloveless hand again and held it fast, and kissed the work-worn fingers again and again.

"You know that I love you, fondly, dearly, with all my soul. Hester, only yesterday my doctor told me that I have not many years to spend upon this planet—perhaps not many months. He told me to be happy if I could—

happy with the woman I love, for my day of happiness must be brief even at the best. It is but a poor remnant of life that I offer, Hester, but it means all myself—mind and heart and hope and dreams are all centred and bound up in you. Since I have known you—since that first night under the stars when you were so hard and cold, when you would have nothing to say to me—since that night I have loved only you, lived only for you.”

She had heard him in despite of herself, her free will struggling against her love, like a bird caught in a net. Yes, she loved him. Her desolate heart had gone to him as gladly, blindly, eagerly as his heart had gone to her. There had been no more hesitation, no more doubt than in Margaret in the garden, when in a sweet simplicity that scarce knew fear of shame, she gave her young heart to her unknown lover. Hester's love was just as pure, and fond, and unselfish; but she had more knowledge of danger than Goethe's guileless maiden. She knew that peril lay in Gerard Hillersdon's love—generous, reverential even, as it might seem. It was only a year ago that she had sat, late into the night,

reading *Clarissa Harlowe*, and she knew how tender, how delicate, how deeply respectful a lover might seem and yet harbour the basest designs against a woman's honour.

"You have no right to talk to me like this," she said indignantly. "You take advantage of my loneliness and my misery. Do you think I can forget the distance your fortune has set between us? I know that you are bound to another woman—that you will marry a woman who can do you honour before the world. I know that in England wealth counts almost as high as rank, and that a marriage between a millionaire and a work-girl is out of the question."

"A lady is always a lady, Hester. Do you think your womanly dignity is lowered in my esteem because you have toiled to support your father—do you think there is any man in England who would not admire you for that self-sacrifice? Yes, it is true that I am bound in honour to another woman—to a woman whom I loved four years ago, and whom I thought this world's one woman—but from that first night when I followed you across the Park—when you

sent me away from you so cruelly, the old love was dead. It died in an hour, and no effort of mine would conjure the passion back to life. I knew then how poor a thing that first love was—a young man's fancy for a beautiful face. My love for you is different. I should love you as dearly if that sweet face of yours was faded and distorted—if those sweet eyes were blind and dim. I should love you as the clerk loved the leper—with a passion that no outward circumstance could change.”

They were walking slowly under the trees—in the warm darkness of a breathless August night. He had his arm round her, and though her face was turned from him she did not repulse him. She let his arm clasp her, and draw her nearer and nearer, till it seemed as they moved slowly under the wavering branches as if they were one already. Other obligations, the opinion of the world, the past, the future, what could these matter to two beings whose hearts beat throb for throb, in the sweet madness of newly-spoken love!

“Dearest, say you love me. I know it, I know it—only let me hear, let me hear it from those lips. Hester, you love me, you love me.”

Her face was turned to him now—pale in that faint light of distant stars, dark violet eyes still darker in the shadow of night. Their lips met, and between his passionate kisses he heard the faint whisper, “Yes, I love you—love you better than my life—but it cannot be.”

“What cannot be—not love’s sweet union—all our life, my poor brief life, spent together in one unbroken dream, like this, like this, and this——”

She wrenched herself out of his arms.

“You know that it cannot be—you know that you cannot marry me—that it is cruel to try to cheat me—with sweet words that mean nothing. No man ever kissed me before—except my father. You have made me hate myself. Let me go—let me never hear your voice again.”

“Hester, is there no other way? Do you want the marriage law to bind us? Won’t you trust in me—won’t you believe in me—as other women have trusted their lovers, all the world over?”

“Don’t,” she cried passionately, “why could you not leave those words unspoken? Why must you fill my cup of shame? I knew those hateful

words would come if ever I let you tell me of your love, and I have tried to hinder your telling me. Yes, I knew what your love was worth. You will keep your promise to the great lady—your sister told me about her—and you would let me lose my soul for your love. You have been trying to win my heart—so that I should have no power to resist you—but I am not so weak and helpless a creature as you think. Oh, God, look down upon my loneliness—motherless, fatherless, friendless—take pity upon me because I am so lonely. I have none but Thee.”

She stood with clasped hands, looking skyward in the moonlight; sublime in her simple faith, even to the unbeliever.

“Hester, do you think that God cares about marriage lines? He has made His creatures to love as we love. Our love cannot be unholy in His sight—any more than the unwedded love of Adam and Eve in the Garden.”

“He never made us for dishonour,” she answered firmly. “Good night, Mr. Hillersdon—good night and good-bye.”

She turned and walked quickly, with steady

steps, towards Rosamond Road. A minute ago he had held her clasped close in his enfolding arms, had felt the tumult of her heart mixing with the tumult of his own—had counted her all his own, pledged to him for ever by those passionate kisses, those tears which mingled with his tears, tears of joy and triumph, the hysterical fervour of exultant love. And now she called him “Mr. Hillersdon,” and turned her back upon him as coolly as upon any importunate adventurer—invincible in her purity, although she loved him.

Angry, despairing, his thoughts took a sudden turn—worthy of Lovelace. He told himself that he would diplomatise—*reculer pour mieux sauter*.

“Let me walk with you to your door at least,” he said, “if it is to be good-bye.”

She made no answer, and he walked by her side, watching her profile in the dim light. She had wiped away her tears, her hot blushes had faded to marble pallor, her lips were firmly set, as if the face were verily marble, delicately chiselled by some old-world sculptor.

“Hester, you are very cruel to me.”

"It is you who are cruel. Most of all when you tried to trade upon my weakness, to frighten me by saying you have not long to live. That was the cruellest of all."

"But it is true, Hester—as true as that you and I are walking here side by side. When I first came into my fortune, knowing myself far from strong, I went to a dear old doctor who saved my life from a sharp attack of lung disease when I was a little boy. I saw him more than a year ago, and he was not particularly hopeful about me even then. He warned me that I must live carefully, that all strong emotions would tend to shorten my days. I saw him again yesterday, for I was bent on knowing the worst. He was all kindness and all truth. He told me that I had changed for the worse within the year that was gone, and that only by extreme carefulness could I prolong my life for a few years. And then he bade me go and be happy, as if that were such an easy thing to do."

"It must be easy for you to be happy. You have all the world to choose from," she said falteringly.

"A futile privilege if there is only one thing

in the world that I want. Deny me that and you reduce me to misery."

"Did your doctor really say that you have but a few years to live?" she asked, and he knew by her voice that she was crying, though her face was averted. "Don't try to make me unhappy. I'm sure it is not true that he said so. Doctors don't say such things."

"Sometimes, Hester. Even a physician will tell the truth when he is hard pressed. My doctor spoke very plainly. It is only in a life of calm—which means a life of happiness—that I can hope to prolong my existence a few years—just the years that are best and brightest, when love lights them. If I am worried and unhappy my life will be a question of months instead of years. But if you do not care for me that makes no difference to you."

"You know that I care for you. Should I be speaking to you now—anxious about your health—after what you have said to me, if I did not care for you? If love were not stronger than pride, I should never have spoken to you again. But I am speaking to you to-night for the last time. Our friendship is at an end for ever."

“Our friendship never began, Hester. From the first I had but one feeling about you, and that was passionate love, which takes no heed of difficulties, does not forecast the future. I was wrong, perhaps, hampered as I am, to pursue you; but I followed where my heart led; I could not count the cost for you or for me. You are right—you are wise. We must part. Good night, dear love, and good-bye!”

His tone was firm and deliberate. She believed him—believed that he was convinced, and that trial and temptation were over. She turned to him with a choking sob, put her hand in his, and whispered good-bye. Those two hands clasped each other passionately, but with briefest pressure. She hurried from him to the little iron gate, let herself in at the unguarded door—what need of locks and bolts when there was so little to tempt the thief?—and vanished from his sight.

He went back to the river side, and sat there for an hour or more watching the tide flow by, and thinking, thinking, thinking of the woman he loved and the brief span he had for love or for life.

“And she can believe that I renounce her—knowing that she loves me—having held her in my arms and felt her sweet lips trembling against my own in love’s first kiss. How simple women are!”

It was eleven o’clock before he remembered that he had asked Jermyn to sup with him at midnight. He walked home, for his heated brain and throbbing pulses needed active movement. He walked faster than he had walked three or four years ago, when he was a strong man. He thought of many things upon his way through streets that were still full of traffic and busy life, and once or twice as he caught the expression of a passing face he saw a kind of wondering horror in strange eyes that looked at him.

“I must be looking miserably ill to-night,” he thought, after one of those casual glances. “Perhaps I am even worse than Dr. South seemed to think me. He questioned me about my family history, and I rather shirked the subject—paltered with the truth—told him my father and mother are alive and well. But the history is bad all the same. Bad, decidedly bad. Two lovely young sisters of my mother faded off this

earth before they saw a twentieth birthday, and an uncle I can just remember died at three and thirty. My family history won't justify a hopeful view of a bad case."

He supped with Jermyn, and sat late into the night, and drank deeper than his wont, and he told Jermyn the story of his love. Of his free will he would not have chosen Justin Jermyn for a confidant, and yet he poured out all his hopes and dreams, the whole history of his passion in all its weakness and all its strength to this man whose mocking cynicism continually revolted him. Yet it may be that the cynic's companionship was the only society he could have endured at this stormy period. The voice of conscience must be stifled somehow; and how could it be so easily drowned as by this spirit of evil which denied the existence of good, which laughed at the idea of virtue and honour in man or woman?

"If the first man who put a fence round a bit of land and called it his was an enemy to his fellow-men," said Justin Jermyn, "what of the first man who set up a narrow standard of conduct, a hard and fast rule of morality, and said

by this standard and by this line and rule of mine shall men act and live for evermore, whether they be happy or miserable? Along this stony road, hedged in with scruples and prejudices, shall men tramp painfully to their dull and dreary end; yes, even while in the fair open country on either side those thorny fences, joy and love and gladness beckon to gardens of roses and valleys fairer than Eden. Why torment yourself because you have given a foolish old man the means of indulging freely in his favourite vice—an innocent vice, since it hurts none but himself—whereby you have perhaps provided for him the happiest days of his life?”

“I have given him the means of breaking his daughter’s heart,” said Gerard, remorsefully.

“Skittles! No woman’s heart was ever yet broken by a drunken father. It needs a nearer and dearer love than the filial to break hearts. All that Hester Davenport wants in this life is to be happy with the man she loves. The drunken father might prove a stupendous difficulty if you wanted to parade your divinity through the electric glare of the great world as

Mrs. Gerard Hillersdon—but if you want her for your goddess, your Egeria, hidden from the glare and the din, the existence of her father, drunk or sober, is of little moment.”

CHAPTER VI.

“LOST, LOST! ONE MOMENT KNELLED THE WOE
OF YEARS.”

GERARD let three whole days go by without making any attempt to see Hester. Lovelace himself could hardly have been more diplomatic. He was completely miserable in the interval, counted the hours, and wondered perpetually whether the woman he loved was hungering for his presence as he hungered for hers. He spent the greater part of the time with Jermyn; driving to Richmond one day to dine at the Star and Garter and sit late into the night, watching the mists rising in the valley, and the stars shining on the river; driving to Maidenhead on another day and loitering long upon the shadowy river, and sitting in a riverside garden smoking and talking half through the sultry summer night; and in this long *tête-à-tête* he sounded

the uttermost depths of Justin Jermyn's godlessness and cheerful egotism.

"The one thing that I am certain of in this Rhadamanthine universe," said this philosophical worldling, "is that I, Justin Jermyn, exist; and this being my one certainty, I hold that my one duty—the duty I owe to myself—is to be happy, and to make the best of the brief span which I am to enjoy on this earth. Reason tells me that to be happy and to live long I must abjure passion—reason tells me that serenity of mind means health and prolonged life; and to this end I have learnt to treat life lightly, as a farce rather than a tragedy, and to give my affection neither to man nor woman—to be slave neither of friendship nor of love. A selfish philosophy, I grant you; but self is my only certainty."

"An admirable philosophy, if it were as easy to practise as to preach. And have you never loved?"

"Never, in the fashion that you call love. I have never been unhappy for a woman's sake."

"And the domestic affections—father, mother, family?"

"I never knew them. I was flung as a waif upon the world, reared upon charity, the architect of my own fortune—such as it is. I am like Hester Summerson in 'Bleak House.' My mother was my disgrace, and I was hers. I am at least so far a follower of St. Paul, that I owe no man anything. I sink the second part of the precept."

Gerard meditated upon Jermyn's character as he drove home, towards daybreak, the man himself slumbering by his side. It was perhaps only natural that a man cut off from all family ties, cheated of mother's love and father's friendship, a stranger to every bond of blood relationship, should have grown up to manhood heartless and passionless, should have trained himself to the settled calm of a philosophical egotism, attaining in the morning of life that immunity from all the pains and penalties of the affections which the average egotist only achieves in old age.

Gerard looked at the sleeper wonderingly, almost with envy. The fair pale face was unmarked by a line that told of anxious thought or deep feeling. The sleeper's lips were parted in a faint smile, as if even in sleeping he felt the

sensuous pleasure of life on a fair summer morning—the perfume of flowers from a hundred gardens, the soft breath of the wind creeping up from the west, warm with the glow of last night’s sunset. The joy of living! Yes, this man who loved no one enjoyed life in all its fulness; and he, Gerard, with two millions to spend, and, it might be, less than two years to spend them in, was miserable—miserable because of the cowardly incertitude which made him unable to take the straight and honourable road to happiness while the sinuous and evil way lay open to him.

He went to Chelsea at dusk on the third evening after Hester’s tearful farewell. She came quickly to the door in answer to his knock, and he was startled at the change which three days had made in her. The first words she spoke told him that it was not love of him which had so altered her, but poignant anxiety about her father.

“He has never been home since that night,” she said. “I have been in search of him at every place that I could think of as possible for him to have gone to, but I can hear nothing of him

since Tuesday night—the night you were here. He was at the Swan Tavern that night, sitting in the coffee-room drinking brandy and water till the house closed. He was talking a good deal, and he was very excited in his manner when he left, but the people would not tell me if he had drunk much. They pretended not to know how much brandy had been served to him. I have been to the police office, and the river has been dragged along by the Embankment, where he and I used always to walk. They were very good to me at the police station, and they have promised to do all they can to find him, living or dead. But, oh”—with a burst of uncontrollable weeping—“I fear they will never find him alive. He could have had only a little money, and he must have spent it all on brandy, and then when he was mad with drink—ah, you don’t know how drink maddens him—he may have walked into the river, or thrown himself in, miserable and despairing. He was at the Swan at eleven o’clock, only a few minutes’ walk from the river, and I can find no one who saw him after that hour. I think he must have meant to come home—I don’t think he

would wilfully desert me—but some accident, some fit of madness——”

She could not speak for sobbing. Gerard led her into the parlour, where the old man's empty chair reminded him of that last interview, and of the snare he had set for a weak sinner's feet. Looked at in the light of Hester's grief to-night, and the awful possibilities she suggested, the thing which he had done seemed little short of murder.

“I will go to Scotland Yard, Hester,” he said, eager to comfort her. “I will set the cleverest detectives in London at work, and it shall go hard if they don't find your father. My dearest, don't give way to these morbid imaginings. Be sure he is safe somewhere—only hiding because he feels that he has disgraced himself in your eyes. He has been afraid to come home, knowing how grieved you would be at his backsliding. Be comforted, dear love.” His arms were round her, and he drew the pale pinched face to his own, and again their lips met, but this time Hester's kiss was the kiss of despair. She clung to her lover in her grief and fear. She forgot the peril of such consolations.

What comfort could he give her about her father, except the assurance that all that money could do to find him should be done, and that once being found every possible means should be taken to ensure his welfare in the future. He told her that there were doctors who had made such cases their chief study, homes where her father could be surrounded with every luxury, and yet secured from the possibility of indulgence in his fatal vice. He showed her how happy and free from care her future might be if she would only trust her own fate and her father's to him. And then came words of love, burning words that have been spoken again and again upon this earth with good or evil import—words that may be true when the lips speak them, yet false within the year in which they are spoken—words that promise an eternity of love, and may be uttered in all good faith, and yet prove lighter than the thistledown wafted across summer pastures.

Three days ago she had been strong to resist the tempter, strong in womanly pride and maiden modesty. To-night she was broken down by grief, worn and fevered by sleepless nights,

almost reckless in her aching misery. To-night she listened to those vows of love. What had she on this earth but his love, if the father for whom she had toiled was indeed lying at the bottom of the river, her purpose in life gone for ever? Who could be more lonely and friendless than she was to-night?

So she listened to his pleading, heard him while he urged her to consider how poor a thing that legal tie was which he entreated her to forego; how often, how lightly cancelled by the disgraceful revelations of the divorce court.

"Time was when marriage meant till death," he said, "but that is an exploded fashion. Marriage nowadays means the convenience of a settlement which will enable a man either to found a family or to cheat his creditors. Marriage means till husband and wife are tired of each other, and till the lady has grown callous enough to face the divorce court."

And then he reminded her how the most romantic passions, the loves that have become history are not those alliances upon which parish priest and family lawyer have smiled. He reminded her of Abelard and Heloise, of Henri's

passion for Gabrielle, and Nelson's deathless love for Emma Hamilton. He urged that society itself had pardoned these fair offenders, for love's sweet sake.

Her intellect was too clear to be deceived by such shallow reasoning.

On the very brink of the abyss she recoiled. Loving him with all her heart, knowing that life without him meant a colourless and hopeless existence—a hand to hand struggle with adversity, knowing by too bitter experience that to be well born and poor means lifelong humiliation, she yet had the strength to resist his pleading.

“Your wife or nothing,” she said. “I never meant to hear your voice again after that night. I prayed to God that we might never meet again. And now for my father's sake I humiliate myself so far as to ask your help. If you will bring him back to me I will thank and bless you—and will try to forget your degrading propositions.”

“Degrading, Hester!” he cried reproachfully, trying to take her hand again, the hand that had lain softly in his a few moments ago.

"Yes, degrading! What could you say to any wretched lost woman in London worse than you have said to me? You talk to me of love—and you offer me shame for my portion."

"Hester, that is a woman's narrow way of looking at life. As if the priest and the ring made all the difference."

"If you cared for me you would make me your wife."

"I am not free to marry, Hester. I am bound by a tie which I cannot break yet awhile. The tie may be loosened in years to come, and then you shall be my wife. So soon as I am free we will have the priest and the ring, the whole ecclesiastical formula—although that formula will not make me one whit more your slave than I am this night."

"I don't want a slave," she said resolutely. "I want a husband whom I can love and honour. And now I am going back to the police station to ask if there is any news."

"Let me go with you."

"I had rather you went to Scotland Yard, as you promised."

"I will go to Scotland Yard. I will do anything to prove my love and loyalty."

"Loyalty. Oh, Mr. Hillersdon, do not play with words. I am an ignorant, inexperienced girl, but I know what truth and loyalty mean—and that you have violated both to me."

They left the house together, in opposite directions. Gerard walked towards Oakley Street, hailed the first cab he met, which took him to Scotland Yard, where he saw the officials, and gave a careful description of the missing Nicholas Davenport, age, personal characteristics, manners, and habits. When asked if the missing man had any money about him at the time of his disappearance, he professed ignorance, but added that it was possible that he had money. It was late in the evening when he left Scotland Yard, and he went into the Park, and roamed about for some time in a purposeless manner, his brain fevered, his nerves horribly shaken. This horror of Nicholas Davenport's fate absorbed his mind at one moment, and in the next he was thinking of Hester, and his rejected love, troubled, irresolute, full of pity for the woman he loved, full of tenderest compassion for scruples which seemed

to him futile and foolish in the world as he knew it, where illicit liaisons were open secrets, and where no man or woman refused praise and honour to sin in high places. He pitied the simplicity which clung to virtue for its own sake, a strange spectacle in that great guilty city, a penniless girl sacrificing love and gladness for the sake of honour.

He went from the Park to the Small Hours, a club where he knew he was likely to find Jermyn, who rarely went to bed before the summer dawn. "It is bad enough to be obliged to go to bed by candle-light from October to March," said Jermyn, who declared that any man who took more than three or four hours' sleep in the twenty-four shamefully wasted his existence.

"We are men, not dormice," he said, "and we are sent into this world to live—not to sleep."

Gerard found Jermyn the ruling spirit of a choice little supper-party, where the manners of the ladies—although they were not strictly "in society," and would not have been received at the Heptachord, or at the Sensorium—were irreproachable, so irreproachable, indeed, that the

party would have been dull but for Justin Jermyn. His ringing laugh and easy vivacity raised the spirits of his convives, and made the champagne more exhilarating than the champagne of these latter days is wont to be.

“A capital wine, ain’t it?” he asked gaily. “It’s a new brand, ‘Fin de Siècle,’ the only wine I care for.”

Gerard drank deep of the new wine, would have drunk it had it been vitriol, in the hope of drowning Nicholas Davenport’s ghost; and when the little banquet was over, and youth and folly were waltzing to the strains of Strauss in an adjoining room, he linked his arm through Jermyn’s and led him out of the club, and into the stillness of St. James’ Park.

Here he told his mentor all that had happened, denounced himself as a traitor, and perhaps a murderer. “It was your scheme,” he said, “you suggested the snare, and you have made me the wretch I am.”

Jermyn’s frank laughter had a sound of mockery as he greeted this accusation.

“That is always the way,” he said, “a man asks for advice, and turns upon his counsellor.

You wanted to get that officious old father out of the way. I suggested a manner of doing it. And now you call me Mephisto and yourself murderer."

And then with airiest banter he laughed away Gerard's lingering scruples, scoffed at man's honour and at woman's virtue, and Gerard, who had long ago abandoned all old creeds for a dreary agnosticism, heard and assented to that mocking sermon, whose text was self, and whose argument was self-indulgence.

"I shudder when I think of the myriads of fanatics who have sacrificed happiness here for the sake of an imaginary paradise—wretches who have starved body and soul upon earth to feast and rejoice in the New Jerusalem," said Jermyn, finally, as they parted at Buckingham Gate in the faint flush of dawn.

Less than half an hour afterwards Gerard was in the Rosamond Road, and at the little iron gate that opened into the scrap of garden, where a cluster of sunflowers rose superior to the dust, pale in the steel-blue light of dawn.

The lamp was still burning in the parlour, and he saw Hester's shadow upon the blind. She

was sitting with her elbows on the table, her face buried in her hands, and he knew that she must be weeping or praying. She had let her lamp burn on, unconscious of the growing daylight. The window was open at the top, but the lower half was shut. He tapped on the pane, and the shadow of a woman's form rose up suddenly, and broadened over the blind.

"Hester, Hester," he called. He raised the sash, as she drew up the blind, and they stood face to face, both pale, breathless, and agitated.

"You have heard of him, you have seen him," she cried excitedly. "Is it good news?"

"Yes, Hester, yes," he answered, and sprang into the room.

CHAPTER VII.

ALL ALONG THE RIVER.

BETWEEN Reading and Oxford there is a river-side village, of which the fashionable world has yet taken scant notice. It lies beyond the scene of the great river carnivals, and the houseboat is even yet a strange apparition beside those willowy shores. There is an old church with its square tower and picturesque graveyard placed at a bend of the river, where the stream broadens into a shallow bay. The church; a straggling row of old-world cottages, with over-hanging thatch and low cob walls, half hidden under roses, honeysuckle, and Virginia creeper, cottages whose gardens are gorgeous with the vivid colouring of old-fashioned flowers; a general shop, which is also the post-office; and a rustic butcher's, with verandah and garden, constitute

the village. The Rectory nestles close beside the church, and the Rectory garden brims over into the churchyard, long trails of banksia roses straggling across the low stone wall which divides the garden of the living from the garden of the dead. The churchyard is one of the prettiest in England, for the old Rector has cared for it and loved it during his five and thirty years' incumbency, and nowhere are the roses lovelier or the veronicas finer than in that quiet resting-place by the river.

The land round about belongs to a man of old family, who is rich enough to keep his estate unspoiled by the speculating builder, and who would as soon think of cutting off his right hand as of cutting up the meadows he scampered over on his sheltie, sixty years ago, into eligible building plots, or of breaking through the tangled hedges of hawthorn and honeysuckle to make new roads for the erection of semi-detached villas. In a word Lowcombe is still the country pure and simple, undefiled by the suburban early English or the shoddy Queen Anne schools of architecture.

On the brink of the Thames, and about twenty

minutes' walk from Lowcombe Church, there is an old-fashioned cottage, humble as to size and elevation, but set in so exquisite a garden that the owner of a palace might envy its possessor a retreat so fair in its rustic seclusion.

Here, while the second crop of roses were in their fullest beauty, a young couple whose antecedents and belongings were unknown to the inhabitants of Lowcombe set up their modest menage of a man and two maids, a gardener, a dinghy, and a skiff.

The village folks troubled themselves very little about these young people, who paid their bills weekly; but the few gentilities in the parish of Lowcombe were much exercised in mind about a couple who brought no letters of introduction, and who might, or might not, be an acquisition to the neighbourhood. The fact that Mr. Hanley was alleged to have bought the house he lived in and forty acres of meadow land attached thereto, gave him a certain status in the parish, and made the question as to whether Mr. and Mrs. Hanley should or should not be called upon a far more serious problem than it would have been in the case of an annual tenant, or even a leaseholder.

"Nobody seems to have heard of these Hanleys," said Miss Malcolm, a Scottish spinster, who prided herself upon race and respectability, to Mrs. Donovan, an Irish widow, who was swollen with the importance that goes with income rather than with blue blood. "If the man was of good family surely some of us must have heard of him before now. Lady Isabel, who goes about immensely in the London season, thinks it very curious that she should never have met this Mr. Hanley in society."

"Old Banks was asking an extortionate price for the Rosary and the land about it," said Mrs. Donovan, "so the man must have money."

"Made in trade, I dare say," speculated Miss Malcolm, whereat the widow, whose husband had made his fortune as a manufacturer and exporter of Irish brogues, reddened angrily. It was painful to remember in the aristocratic *dolce far niente* of her declining years that the name of Donovan was stamped upon millions of boots in the old world and the new, and that the famous name was still being stamped by the present proprietor.

Finally, after a good deal of argument, it was

decided at a tea-party which included the *élite* of the parish, with the exception of the Rector, that until Mr. Muschatt, of Muschatt's Court, had called upon the new people at the Rosary no one else should call. Whatever was good in the eyes of Muschatt, whose pedigree could be traced without a break from the reign of Edward the Confessor, must be good for the rest of the parish.

And while the village Agora debated their social fate, what of this young couple? Were they languishing for the coming of afternoon callers, pining for the sight of strange faces, and unfamiliar names upon a cluster of visiting cards? Were they nervously awaiting the village verdict as to whether they were or were not to be visited? Not they! Perhaps they hardly knew that there was any world outside that garden by the river, and that undulating stretch of pasture where the fine old timber gave to meadow land almost the dignity of a park. Here they could wander for hours meeting no one, hearing no voices but their own, isolated by the intensity of an affection that took no heed of yesterday or to-morrow.

"I never knew what happiness meant till I loved you, Hester," said the young man whom Lowcombe talked of as "This Mr. Hanley."

"And I am happy because you are happy," Hester answered softly. "And you will not talk any more about having only a year or two to live, will you, Gerard? That was all nonsense—only said to frighten me—wasn't it?"

He could not tell her that it was sober, serious truth, and that he had in nowise darkened the doctor's dark verdict. Those imploring eyes urged him to utter words of hope and comfort.

"I believe doctors are often mistaken in a case, because they underrate the influence of the mind upon the body," he said. "I was so miserable when I went to Dr. South that I can hardly wonder he thought me marked for death."

"And you are happy, now, Gerard—really, really happy; not for a day only?" she asked pleadingly.

"Not for a day, but for ever, so long as I have you, sweet wife."

He called her by that sacred name often in their talk, not being sensitive enough to divine that at every repetition of the name to which

she had no right, her heart thrilled with a strange sudden pain. She troubled him with no lamentings over the sacrifice he had exacted from her. She had never reproached him with the treachery that had made her his. Generous, devoted, and self-forgetful, she gave him her heart as she would have given him her life, and her tears and her remorse were scrupulously hidden from him. To make him happy was now the sole desire and purpose of her life. Of her father's fate she was still uncertain, but she was not without hope that he lived. A detective had traced a man, whose description tallied with that of Nicholas Davenport, to Liverpool, where he had embarked on a steamer bound for Melbourne within two days of Davenport's disappearance from Chelsea. The passage had been taken in the name of Danvers, and the passenger had described himself as a clergyman of the Church of England. Hester was the more inclined to believe that the man so described might be her father as he had often talked of going back to Australia and trying his luck again in that wider world. It was not because he had failed once that he must needs fail again, he had told her.

“But how could he have got the money for his passage?” asked Hester. “He had exhausted all his old friends. It seems impossible that he could have had money enough to pay for the voyage to Melbourne.”

And then on his knees at her feet in the silence of the night, with tears and kisses and protestations of remorse, Gerard Hillersdon confessed his sin.

“It was base beyond all common baseness,” he said. “You can never think worse of me for that act than I think of myself. But your father stood between us. I would have committed murder to win you!”

“It might have been murder,” she said dejectedly.

“I have told you my crime, and you hate me for it. I was a fool to tell you.”

“Hate you! No, Gerard, no; I can never hate you. I should go on loving you if you were the greatest sinner upon this earth. Do you think I should be here if I could help loving you?”

His head sank forward upon her knees, and he sobbed out his passion of remorse and self-abase-

ment, and received absolution. He tried to persuade her that all would be well, that her father's health might be benefited by a long sea voyage, and that he might not fall back into the old evil ways. He might not! That was the utmost that could be said; a faint hope at best. Yet this faint hope comforted her; and in that summer dream of happiness, in the long days on the river, the long *tête-à-tête* with a companion who was never weary of pouring out his thoughts, his feelings, his unbeliefs to that never-wearying listener, all sense of trouble vanished out of her mind. She only knew that she was beloved, and that to be thus beloved was to be happy. Her burden of tears would have to be borne, perhaps, some day far away in the dim future, when he should weary of her and she should see his love waning. There must be a penalty for such a sin as hers; but the time of penance was still afar off, and she might die before the fatal hour of disillusion. She thrust aside all thought of dark days to come, and devoted herself to the duty of the present—the duty of making her lover happy. All his sins against her were forgiven; and she was his without one thought of self.

They had begun their new life almost as casually as the babes in the wood, and after wandering about for a few days in the lovely Thames Valley, stopping at quiet out-of-the-way villages, they had come to Lowcombe, the least sophisticated of all the spots they had seen. Here they found the Rosary, a thatched cottage set in a delicious garden, with lawn and shrubberies sloping to the river. Successive tenants had added to the original building, and there were two or three fairly good rooms under the steep gabled roof, one a drawing-room open to the rafters, and with three windows opening into a thatched verandah. The Rosary had long been for sale, not because people had not admired it, but because the owner, an Oxford tradesman, had asked an extravagant price for his property.

Gerard gave him his price without question, having seen that Hester was enamoured of the riverside garden, and in three days the cottage was furnished, paint cleaned, walls repapered, and everything swept and garnished, and Hester installed as mistress of the house, with a man and two maids, engaged at Reading.

The furniture was of the simplest, such furni-

ture as a young clergyman might have chosen for his first vicarage. Hester had entreated that there might be nothing costly in her surroundings, no splendour or luxury which should remind her of her lover's wealth.

"I want to forget that you are a rich man," she said. "If you made the house splendid I should feel as if you had bought me."

Seeing her painfully earnest upon this point, Gerard obeyed her to the letter. Except for the elegance of art muslins and Indian draperies, and for the profusion of choice flowers in rooms and landings and staircase, except for the valuable books scattered on the tables and piled in the window-seats, the cottage might have been the home of modest competence rather than of boundless wealth.

Hester's touch lent an additional grace even to things that were in themselves beautiful. She had the home genius which is one of the choicest of feminine gifts—the genius which pervades every circumstance of home-life, from the adornment of a drawing-room to the arrangement of a dinner-table. Before he had lived at Lowcombe for a week Gerard had come to see Hester's

touch upon everything. He had never before seen flowers so boldly and picturesquely grouped ; nor in all the country houses he had visited and admired had he ever seen anything so pretty as the cottage vestibule, the deep embrasure of the long latticed window filled with roses, and in each angle of the room a tall glass vase of lilies reaching up towards the low timbered ceiling. No hand but Hester's was allowed to touch the books which he had brought to this retreat—a costly selection from his library at Hillersdon House. He had seen to the packing of the two large cases that conveyed these books, and he had so arranged their conveyance that none of his servants should know where they went after the railway van had carried them away. No one was to know of this retreat by the river—not even Justin Jermyn, his confidant and *alter ego*. He wanted this new life of his—this union of two souls that were as one—to remain for ever a thing apart from his everyday existence ; he wanted this home to be a secret haven, where he might creep to die when his hour should come ; and it seemed to him that even the inevitable end would lose its worst terrors here,

in Hester's arms, with her sweet voice to soothe the laborious passage to the unknown land.

And if death would be less awful here than elsewhere, how sweet was life in this rural hermitage. How blissful the long summer days upon the river, with this gentle, pensive girl, who seemed so utterly in sympathy with him; who, after one week of union thought as he thought, believed as he believed; had surrendered life, mind, heart, and being to the man she loved, merging her intellectual identity into his, until nothing was left of the creed learnt in childhood and faithfully followed through girlhood, except a tender memory of something which had been dear and sacred, and which for her had ceased to be.

For her Christ was no longer the Saviour and Redeemer she had worshipped. He was only the "Man of Nazareth"—a beautiful and admirable character, standing out from the tumultuous background of the world's history, radiant with the calm, clear light of perfect goodness, the gifted originator of life's simplest and purest ethics, a teacher whose wise counsels had been darkened and warped by long centuries of superstition, and

who was only now emerging from the spectre-haunted midnight of ignorance into the clear light of reason.

Gerard belonged to the school of sentimental agnostics. He was willing to speak well of Christ and of His prophets, was full of admiration for the grand personality of Elijah, and thought the Book of Job the loftiest expression of human imaginings. He loved to dwell upon the picturesque in the Bible, and Hester learnt from his conversation how familiar an infidel may be with Holy Writ. When she told him how great a consolation the Christian's unquestioning belief had been to her in the darkest days of her poverty, he smiled at her sweet simplicity, and said how he too had been a believer till he began to think. And so, with many tears, as if she had been parting with some cherished human friend, she let the Divine Image of the Man-God go, and accepted the idea of the God-like Man, a being to be named in the same breath with Socrates and Plato, with Shakespeare and Milton—only a little higher than the highest modern intellect. Only a week, and a creed was destroyed, but in that week what a flood of talk about all

things in heaven and on earth, what theories, and dreams, and philosophies sounded and explored. To this woman, whom he loved more fondly than he had ever dreamed of loving, Gerard gave the intellectual experience of his manhood, from the hour he began to ponder upon the problem of man's existence to his latest opinion upon the last book he had read. Had she not loved him, her own simple faith, the outcome of feeling unsustained by thought, might have been strong enough to stand fast against his arguments; but love took the part of the assailant, and the result was a foregone conclusion. Had he been a religious enthusiast, a fervid Papist, believing in saintly relics, and miracle-working statues, she would have believed as he taught her to believe. Her faith, fortified by her love, would have removed mountains. With her, to love meant total self-abnegation. Even the sharp stings of remorse were deadened by the happiness of knowing that her lover was happy; and as she gradually grew to accept his idea of a universe governed only by the laws of human reason, she came to think that whether Church and State had assisted at her marriage was indeed, as Gerard urged, of

infinitesimal significance. And this intellectual emancipation achieved, there remained but one cloud on her horizon. Her only fear or anxiety was for her father's welfare—and even of him she tried to think as little as possible, knowing that she could do nothing for him except await the result of his misconduct. She had given him all the fairest years of her girlhood, and he had accepted her sacrifice, and at the first opportunity had chosen his darling vice in preference to his daughter. She had a new master now, a master at whose feet she laid all the treasures of her life, for whom no sacrifice could ever be too much.

Time is measured by feeling. There are days in every life which mean epochs. One eventful week may stand for more in the sum of existence than half a dozen placid monotonous years. It seemed to Hester, while September was yet young, that her union with Gerard Hillersdon had lasted for half a lifetime. She could scarcely think of herself except as his wife. All the past years seemed dark and shadowy, like a dioramic picture that melts gradually into something strange and new. The name of wife no longer

wounded her ear. The new philosophy taught her that she was no less a wife because she had no legal claim to the title. The new philosophy taught her that she had a right to do what she liked with her life, so long as she did not wrong her neighbour. One clause in that Church Catechism her childish lips had repeated so often, was blotted out for ever. Duty to God was done with, since there was no God. All moral obligations were comprised in duty to man—a reasonable regard for the happiness of the largest number.

That renunciation of the creed of hope was not accomplished without moments of mental agony, even in the midst of that dream of love which filled the world with one adored presence. There were moments when the young heart would have gone up to the old Heaven in prayer—prayer for the endurance of this deep felicity, prayer for the creature she loved too well. But the new Heaven was a blank—an infinite system of worlds and distances, measureless, illimitable—but there was no one there—no one—no mind, no heart, no love, no pity; only systems and movement, perpetual movement, which included light, heat, evolution, everything—a mighty and complex

universe of which her lover and herself were but unconsidered atoms, of whom no higher Existence had ever taken heed, since they two, poor sport of Life and Time, were the crowning glory of evolution. The progress of the species might achieve something loftier in infinite ages to come; but so far they two, Gerard and herself, were the highest outcome of immeasurable ages. For conduct, for happiness, for protection from the dangers that surrounded them, they had to look to themselves and to none other.

Had she been less absorbed by her affection for the creature Hester would have more acutely suffered by this darkening over of the world beyond, which had once been her consolation and her hope; but in Gerard's companionship there was no need of a better world.

Those last weeks of summer were exceptionally beautiful. It seemed as if summer were lingering in the land even when September was drawing to its close. Trees and shrubberies, the flower-beds that made great masses of vivid colour on the lawn—scarlet, orange, golden yellow, deepest azure—were untouched by frost, unbeaten by rain. The broad, old-fashioned border which

gave an old-world air to one end of the garden was glorious with tall gaudy flowers—tritoma, Japanese anemones, cactus dahlias, late-blooming lilies, and roses red and white. And beyond the garden and encircling shrubbery, in the hedgerows and meadows, in the copses and on the patches of hillocky common, heather, gorse, wild-flowers, there was everywhere the same rich luxuriance, the wealth of colour and perfume, that joyous exuberance of Nature which five or six weeks of old-fashioned summer weather can fling over the face of an English landscape.

It may be that this abundant beauty, this delicious interlude of sunshine and blue sky helped Hester Davenport to forget the shadows in her life—to forget all that was painful and dubious in her position, and to exist only in the happiness of the present. Morning after morning the same sunlit river rippled round the boat, which seemed to dance and twinkle in the vivid light, as if it were a living thing, longing to be free and afloat. Morning after morning Gerard and Hester sculled their skiff along the windings of romantic backwaters, halting under a roof of greenery to idle away the sultry hours in talk or

reading. Under those slanting willows, whose green tresses dipped and trailed in the bright blue water, they would sit for a long summer day, Hester's dexterous fingers employed upon some piece of artistic embroidery, while Gerard read aloud to her.

In this way they went through all the devious windings and eloquent incomprehensibilities of the "Revolt of Islam"—in this way Hester heard for the first time of the "Ring and the Book"—and wept and suffered with the gentle heroine, and thrilled and trembled in those scenes of dramatic grandeur and fiery passion, unsurpassed in the literature of power. A new world opened before her as Gerard familiarised her with his favourite authors. The lawlessness of Shelley, the rude vehemence of the Elizabethan dramatists, the florid eloquence of Jeremy Taylor, the capricious brilliancy of De Quincey, the subtle wit of Lawrence Sterne. These and many other writers, long familiar to the man who had lived by literature, were all new to Hester.

"What an ignoramus I have been," she exclaimed; "I thought when I had read Shakespeare and Milton, and Byron and Tennyson I

knew all the best treasures of English literature—but now the treasures seem inexhaustible.”

There were other literatures too to be tasted. They read Eugénie Grandet together, and Hester wept over the heroine’s disappointed life. They read new books and old books, having nothing to do in those six weeks of perpetual summer but read and talk and ramble, and worship one another, each unto the other the beginning and end of life.

“If it could last,” thought Gerard; but Hester, less experienced, and, therefore, more confiding in Fate, dreamt that this Elysium would last till the grim spectre, who tramples down all blisses, broke into their enchanted palace.

She watched his face with fondest anxiety, and it was her delight to mark how the dark lines and the pinched, wan look seemed to be vanishing day by day. Who knows whether it was really so, or whether in the face she worshipped she saw only what she so ardently longed to see, signs of improving health and youth renewed. His eyes had a new brightness, she thought, and if he looked pale in the daylight, he had always a bright colour in the evening as they sat side by

side in the luminous circle of the reading-lamp. And again and again he assured her that happiness had given him a new lease of life, that all the old aches and wearinesses had been subjugated, and that Dr. South would tell a very different story next time he overhauled his patient.

“He told me to seek happiness, and I have sought and found it,” he said, kissing the slender hands that had toiled so patiently in the past, and which now so often lay idly in his.

Gerard thought of the Chart of Life behind the curtain at Hillersdon House, and fancied that when he should again trace a line upon that mystical chart the outline would be bold and free, the stroke of the pen broad and steady.

In those six weeks of happiness he had severed himself almost entirely from his past life, and from that wrestling, striving world in which a bachelor under thirty, with two millions of money, is an important factor. The men of his set had left off wondering why he started neither racing stud nor mammoth yacht, why neither the blue ribbon of the turf nor the glories of the Royal Yacht Squadron had any attraction for him. The masculine portion of society had set

him down finally as a poor creature, without manly aspirations or English pluck. An æsthete, a dilettante, a man good for nothing but to keep a free luncheon table, and to lose a hundred now and again at *écarté* or *piquet*. Women were far more indulgent. They talked of Gerard Hillersdon as "quite too interesting—so delightfully unlike any one else."

He had arranged that all his letters should be re-addressed to the Post Office at Reading, and twice a week he despatched the indispensable replies from Reading to the house-steward, to be posted in London. Thus even his own servants knew of no nearer address than Reading, which was seven miles from the Rosary. He answered only such letters as absolutely required replies, and to these his answers were brief and colourless. He had so concentrated all his thoughts upon Hester, and the placid, sunlit life which they were leading, that it was only by a painful effort he could bring his mind to bear upon the commonplace of friendship or the dry-as-dust of business. Certain letters there were which had to be written somehow, the writing of which was absolute mental agony. These were his weekly

letters to the woman whom he was pledged to marry when the year of her widowhood should have ended. And of that year a quarter had already gone by—a quarter of a year which had drifted him so far away from his old love that he looked back at the dim past wondering, and asked himself, “Did I ever love her? Was not the whole story a concession to society ethics, which demand that every young man should have his goddess, *de par le monde*, every married woman her youthful adorer, every smart *ménage* its open secret, not to know which is not to belong to the smart world?”

Once a week at least he must write to the absent lady; for to neglect her might result in a catastrophe. Her nature, he told himself, was of the catastrophic order, a woman most dangerous to offend. He had never forgotten that moment in Hertford Street when, at the thought of his inconstancy, she had risen up in her fury, white to the lips, save where the hectic of anger burned upon her cheek in one red spot, like a flame. He might doubt—did doubt—if he had ever loved her; but he could not doubt that she loved him, with that love

of woman which is "a fearful and a lovely thing."

No; he must maintain the falsehood of his position till he could find some way of issue from this net which he had made for himself in the morning of life. Now, with love at its zenith, he could conceive no phase of circumstances that could make him false to Hester. Her life must be intertwined with his to the end; albeit he might never parade his passion before the cold, cruel eyes of the world—eyes that stare down the poetry of life, and if a man married Undine would look at her with cold calculation through a tortoiseshell *merveilleuse*, and ask, "What are her people?"

Once a week the lying letter had to be written—lying, for he dared not write too coldly lest the distant divinity should mark the change of temperature and come flying homeward to find out the reason for this falling-off. So he secluded himself in his study one morning in every week, telling Hester that he had troublesome business letters which must be answered, and he composed his laborious epistle, spicing his forced tenderness with flippancy that was meant for wit, elabora-

ting society scandals from the faintest hints in *Truth* or the *World*, rhapsodising on summer time and the poets, and filling his tale of pages somehow.

His conscience smote him when Edith Champion praised these artificial compositions, this Abelard done to order. Her perception of epistolary style was not keen enough to detect the falsehood of the writer.

“What lovely letters you have written me lately,” she wrote, “only too far apart. I never knew you write so eloquently, for you must remember how you used to put me off with a couple of hurried pages. I am touched to the heart at the thought that absence seems only to bring us nearer together, more perfectly in sympathy with each other. I spent half the night—indeed, the mountains were rosy in the sunlight when I closed my book—reading Shelley, after your last letter, in which you told me how you had been reading him lately. You are right. We are too apt to neglect him. Browning is so absorbing with his analytical power—his gift of turning men and women inside-out and dissecting every mental phase—he so thoroughly suits the

temper of the age we live in, which seems to me an age of asking questions for which there are no answers. Write oftener, dearest. Your delightful letters have but one fault—there are too few of them.”

“So much for the divining rod of a woman’s intelligence,” thought Gerard, as he tore up the letter.

And then from the highly cultivated lady, who was well abreast of the stream of modern literature, and who was full of the current ideas of the age, he turned to the fond girl whose delight was to listen to the expression of his ideas, who accepted his gospel as if there were no other teacher on this earth, as if all the wisdom of Buddha, Confucius, and Socrates were concentrated in this young journalist of nine-and-twenty. He turned to Hester, and found in her companionship a sweet reposeful influence he had never felt in the old days when all his leisure hours were spent with Edith Champion.

In one of Edith’s later letters there was a remonstrance.

“You tell me nothing of yourself,” she said.
“Not even where you are or what you are doing.

Your paper and the Knightsbridge post-mark indicate that you are at Hillersdon House, but what are you doing there, and what can be keeping you in London when all the civilised world is scattered over moor and mountain, or roving on the sea? I sometimes fear you are ill—perhaps too ill to travel. If I really thought that I should waive every other consideration and go to London to be near you. And yet your delightful letters could hardly be written by a sick man. There is no languor or depression in them. A whim, I suppose, this lingering in town when everybody else has fled. You were always a creature of whims, and now you have millions you are naturally all the more whimsical. Not to be like other people! was not that your ambition years ago when we used to discuss your career?"

How could he read such letters as these without a pang of remorse? He suffered many such pangs as he read; but in the next half-hour he was floating idly with the current along the lovely river, and Hester's pale young loveliness was opposite him, the sweet face dimly seen in the deep shadow of a broad straw hat. Nothing

that art can lend to beauty was needed to accentuate that delicate harmony of form and colouring. The simple cambric frock, the plain straw hat, became her better than court robes and plumes and jewels could have done. She was just at the age when beauty needs the least adornment.

“I don’t wonder that you refused to be tempted by all my offers of finery from man-mantua-makers,” Gerard said to her one day. “You are lovelier in your cotton gowns than the handsomest woman in London in a hundred guinea confection by Raudnitz or Felix. But some day when we are in Paris I shall insist on dressing you up in their fine feathers, just to see how my gentle Hester will look as the Queen of Sheba. A woman of fashion, drest in the latest modish eccentricity, always recalls her Sheban majesty to my mind.”

“Some day when we are in Paris!”

He often spoke as if their lives were to be spent together, as if wherever he went she would go with him. Sometimes in the midst of her happiness Hester lost herself in a labyrinth of mingled hope and fear. He had told her of an

insurmountable obstacle to their legal union, and yet he spoke as if there were to be no end to this blessed life in which they lived only for each other. Ah, that was the shadow on the dial, that was the one stupendous fear. To this marriage of true minds, marriage unsanctified by church or law, there would come the end—the falling off of love, sudden or gradual; the bitter hopeless day on which she should awaken from her dream, and pass out of Paradise into the bleak barren world. She tried to steep heart and mind in the bliss of the present, to shut her eyes against all possibilities of woe. Whatever the future might bring it would be something to remember she had once been completely happy. Even a single day of such perfect bliss would shine like a star in the night of years to come. She would not spoil the ineffable present by forebodings about the future. And thus it was that Gerard Hillersdon had to listen to no repinings, to kiss away no remorseful tears. She who had given him her heart and life had given with all a woman's self-forgetfulness. What matter how fate might use her by and by? The triumph of her life was in her lover's happiness.

It would be difficult to imagine a life more secluded, more shut in and isolated from the outer world, or a spot more remote from the drawbacks of civilisation; and yet this young couple, wandering in the lanes and over the commons, or gliding along sunlit waters in their picturesque skiff, with its striped red and white sail, and its gaily coloured Oriental cushions, were the cynosure of several pairs of eyes, which took heed of the smallest details in their behaviour or their surroundings, and the subject of several very active tongues, a subject which gave new zest to many a five o'clock tea within driving distance of Lowcombe.

Placid and inoffensive as their lives were, the young people who were known as Mr. and Mrs. Hanley had given umbrage to the whole neighbourhood by various omissions and commissions within the six weeks of their residence at the Rosary.

In the first place they had taken no trouble to conciliate the residents among whom they had descended suddenly, or, in the words of the jovial and facetious curate of an adjoining parish, "as if they had been dropped out of a balloon."

They had brought no letters of introduction. They had not explained themselves. They had planted themselves in the very midst of a select and immaculate little community without producing any evidence of their respectability.

“And yet no doubt they expect people to call upon them,” said Lady Isabel Glendower, the help-meet of an ancient Indian General, who went to garden-parties in a bath chair, and whose wife and daughters had taken upon themselves a tone of authority in all social matters, based upon the lady’s rank as an earl’s daughter. “Mr. Muschatt actually was going to call. I met him last week riding that wretched old cob towards the Rosary, and was just in time to stop him. ‘Surely you are not going to compromise us by calling on these people,’ I said, ‘until we know more about them.’”

“The foolish old thing saw the young woman on the river the other day, and was so taken by her pretty face that he wanted to know more of her,” said Cara Glendower, who was young and skittish. “He raved to me about her transparent complexion and simple cotton frock. Old men are so silly.”

"I think, Lady Isabel, the less we say about these young people, the better," said Miss Malcolm, with awful significance. "They are evidently not the kind of persons you would like your daughters to know. A young man, able to spend money as freely as this young man does, cannot be without a circle of friends; and yet I can answer for it that not a creature except the tradesmen's youths has been to the Rosary for the last six weeks."

"But if they are honeymooning they may wish to be alone," suggested Cara.

"Honeymooning! nonsense, child," retorted Lady Isabel, who prided herself on being outspoken. "I dare say that young woman, in spite of her simple cotton frock, has had as many honeymoons as there are signs in the Zodiac. The most notorious women in London are the women who wear cotton frocks and don't paint their faces."

Mr. and Mrs. Hanley have been six weeks at Lowcombe, and have never been to church. That stamps them," said Mrs. Donovan, at whose luxurious tea-table the conversation took place.

The Rector heard the fag end of the debate.

“I must see if I can persuade them to come to church,” he said, in his mild, kindly voice. “It is rather too much of a jump at conclusions to suppose that because they are not church-goers they are disreputable. Half the young men of the present generation are Agnostics and Darwinians, and a good many young women imitate the young men’s agnosticism just as eagerly as they imitate their collars and ties. I am old enough to know that one must make prodigious allowances for the erratic intellect of youth. Whether Muschatt calls on the Hanleys or not, I shall call and find out what manner of people they are. I am sorry I have put it off so long.”

The Rector had a way of coming down with the heavy foot of benevolence upon the serpent’s head of village malignity, now and again, on which account he was generally spoken of as an eccentric, and a man who would have been better placed anywhere than in the Church of England; an elderly widower, living with a soft-hearted maiden sister, childless, irresponsible, altogether lax in his ideas of morality, a man who took pity upon fallen village girls, and gave himself infinite trouble to save them from further evil,

and to help them to live down their disgrace ; a man who had laboured valiantly in the work of female emigration, and to whom almost every mail from the new world brought ill-spelt letters of gratitude and loving remembrance. Such a man the *élite* of Lowcombe considered should have cast in his lot at the East End of London. In a small settlement of eminently correct people he was out of place. He was too good for the neighbourhood ; and the neighbourhood was too good for him.

CHAPTER VIII.

“SOME DIM DERISION OF MYSTERIOUS
LAUGHTER.”

WHILE Mr. Gilstone, the Rector of Lowcombe, whose worst vice was procrastination, was meditating a ceremonious call upon his new parishioners, accident anticipated his design, and brought him face to face with the young woman whose morals and cotton frocks had met with such drastic treatment at Mrs. Donovan's Thursday tea-drinking.

Sauntering in the Rectory garden on Saturday afternoon Mr. Gilstone's keen glance was attracted by a figure seated near an old, old tombstone in a corner of the churchyard where his garden wall, in all its wealth of foliage, made an angle with the willowy bank of the river. The sunlight on the white cambric frock gave that seated form

and bent brown head an air of something supernal, as it were Dante's divine lady in the light of Paradise. The Rector stepped upon a little knoll that was level with the top of the wall in order to look down upon the lady sitting by the tomb.

Yes, it was Mrs. Hanley—that Mrs. Hanley of whose antecedents and present way of life Lowcombe spoke shudderingly. He could just distinguish the exquisite profile under the shady straw hat, he could see the delicate ear, transparent in the sunlight, the perfect curve of the throat rising from a loosely tied lace handkerchief, the graceful lines of the slender girlish figure in the plain white gown. No art had been used to enhance that perfect beauty, and none was needed. The purity of the white gown, the simplicity of the Tuscan hat, were in harmony with that placid and ideal loveliness.

“Poor child, I hope with all my heart that all is well with her,” mused the Rector, as he stepped down from the grassy knoll, and strolled to the gate opening into the churchyard, and then with quiet step made his way to the tomb against which Hester was sitting, on a grassy

ridge, over which periwinkle and St. John's wort had been allowed to run riot, half covering the crumbling grey stones and clothing the cumbrous early Georgian sepulchre with fresh young beauty. This was a corner of God's acre in which the Rector permitted a careless profusion of foliage, a certain artistic neglect that was part of his plan.

The lady was reading, and on looking down at her book, Mr. Gilstone saw that she was reading Shelley's "Alastor."

She looked up at the sound of his footfall among the leaves, and then calmly resumed her reading. He drew nearer, hat in hand.

"Allow me to introduce myself to you, Mrs. Hanley," he said, in his pleasant voice. "I have been meaning to call upon you and Mr. Hanley for a long time, but indolence and procrastination are the vices of old men. Seeing you just now from my garden I thought I might snatch the opportunity of making friends with you here on my own ground."

She had risen in confusion, blushing violently, with a scalding rush of crimson over brow and cheeks, and her heart beating with almost suffo-

cating force. A criminal upon whose shoulder the law had just laid its iron hand could hardly have suffered more. In that one moment Hester Davenport realised what it was to be a social pariah. It was as if she had awakened suddenly from a dream of bliss to find herself alone in the cold workaday world, face to face with a judge who had power to denounce and punish.

"Pray, sit down," said the old man, "and let us have a little chat."

He seated himself on the low boundary wall—lowest just at this part of the churchyard, where the fairy spleen-wort grew in every chink of the crumbling stones.

"You have been my neighbours for some time," said the Rector, "and yet I have seen so little of you. I am sorry you don't come to my church—but perhaps you are people who object to our simple village services, and you go further afield."

"We do not go to any church," Hester faltered. "It would be only hypocrisy if we were to join in services which have very little meaning for us. We honour and love the Gospel for all that is true and beautiful in it, but we cannot believe

as you and your congregation believe, and so it is better to stop away from church."

"You are very young to have joined the great army of unbelievers," said the Rector, with no change in the gentleness of his tone, or the friendly light of his eyes. He had heard too many young people prattle of their agnosticism to be particularly shocked or startled at the words of unbelief from these girlish lips. "Were you brought up in a household of infidels—were your early teachers unbelievers?"

"Oh no. I was once a Christian," she answered, with a stifled sob. "I once believed—without questioning—believed in the divinity of Christ, believed that He could heal the sick and raise the dead, believed that He was near me at all hours of my life, nearest when I was in deepest sorrow."

"And when did you cease to believe in His presence—when did you lose the assurance of a Saviour who could pity your sorrows and understand your temptations?"

"Doubt came gradually, with thought, and thinking over the thoughts of others far wiser than myself."

“Mr. Hanley, your husband, is an agnostic, I take it?”

The drooping head bent a little lower; the hand on the open book turned a leaf or two with a restless movement.

“He does not believe in miracles,” she answered reluctantly.

“Nor in a life to come—nor in an Almighty God to whom we are all accountable for our actions. I know the creed of the youthful Freethinker—universal liberty; liberty to follow the bent of his own desires and his own passions wherever they may lead him; and for the rest the Gospel of Humanity, which means tall talk about the grandeur and wisdom of man in the abstract, combined with a comfortable indifference to the wants and sorrows of man in the concrete, man at Bethnal Green or Haggerstone. Oh, I know what young men are,” exclaimed the Rector, with indignant scorn; “how shallow, how arrogant, how ready to absorb the floating opinions of their day, and to take ready-made ideas for the results of original thought. Frankly, now, Mrs. Hanley, is it only since your marriage that you have been an infidel?”

Hester faltered a reluctant "Yes."

And then, after a brief pause, she began to plead for the man she idolised.

"Indeed, he is not shallow or ignorant," she said. "He has thought long and deeply upon the religions of the world, has brooded over those instincts which lead the hopes and desires of all of us to a life beyond—an unseen universe. He is not a strong man—he may never live to be old—indeed I sometimes fear he will not, and we have both talked often and long about that other world which we once believed in. We should be so much happier if we could believe—if we could hope that when death parts us it will not be for ever. But how can we hope for the impossible—how can we shut our eyes to the revelations of science—the fixed, immutable laws which hem us in on every side, and show us of what we are made and what must be our end?"

"Dust we are, and to dust we must return," said the Rector, "but do you think there is nothing outside the dust—nothing that will survive and ripen to more perfect life when this poor clay is under the sod. Do you think that the innate belief of all human kind carries no

moral weight against the narrow laws of existence under the conditions and restrictions in which we know it; conditions and restrictions which may be changed in a moment by the fiat of Omnipotence, as the earth is changed by an earthquake or the ocean by a storm. Who, looking at the placid, smiling sea could conceive the fury and the force of a tempest if he had never seen one? You would find it as difficult to believe in that level water lifted mountains high, or in the racing surf, as to believe in the survival of intellect and identity, the passage from a known life here to an unknown life hereafter. The philosophers of these latter days call the unknown the unknowable, or the unthinkable, and suppose they have settled and made an end of everything which they cannot understand. But I am not going to preach sermons out of church, Mrs. Hanley. I am much more interested in you than in your opinions. At your age opinions change, and change again—but the personality remains pretty much the same. Even if you and your husband don't come to church you are my parishioners, and I want to know more of you. I hope you both like Lowcombe?"

"Oh, it is far more than liking. We both love the place."

"And you mean to live among us? You will not grow tired of the river, even when winter sheds a gentle greyness over all that is now so brilliant? There are people who say they are fond of the country—in summer. Take my word for it, the souls of those people are never far from Oxford Street. To love the country one must know and admire every phase and every subtle change of every season. Awakening from a long sleep one should be able to say at the first glance across the woods and hills—'this is mid-October or this is March.' One should know the season almost to a week. You are not one of those who only care for a midsummer landscape, I hope?"

"No, indeed! I love the country always—and I hate London."

The shudder with which the last words were spoken gave earnestness to the avowal.

"You have not been happy in London," said the Rector, his quick ear catching a deeper meaning than the words expressed.

"I have been very unhappy there."

“And here you are quite happy. As a girl you had troubles; your surroundings were not all you could wish; but your wedded life is perfectly happy, is it not?”

“Utterly happy.”

“Come to church, then, my dear Mrs. Hanley. Come and kneel in our village church—the old, old church, where so many have knelt, and given thanks in joy, and been comforted in affliction. Come and give thanks to God for your happiness. It is not for you, who scarcely know what mathematics mean, to refuse to believe in a God because His existence cannot be mathematically demonstrated. Your own heart must tell you that you have need of God, that you have need of a conscience outside your own conscience, a wisdom above your own wisdom. Come and kneel among us, and give God thanks that your lines have been set in pleasant places—and, since I am told you are rich, come and work among our poor. It is good for the young and prosperous to interest themselves in the old and needy. If you go among our cottagers at first as a duty, and perhaps thinking it an unpleasant duty, you

will soon come to love the work for its own sake. There is sweetness in your face that tells me your heart will open to the unhappy."

"I love visiting the poor," Hester answered, brightening a little at this suggestion. "I have been poor, and know what poverty means. I should like to go about among your cottagers—if—if my husband"—she faltered at the word, in spite of all those broader ideas which Gerard had taught her—"if my husband will let me."

"He could hardly refuse you the happiness of making others a little happier—you who possess all the material elements of happiness in superabundance. I feel assured Mr. Hanley will consent to your devoting a few of your leisure hours to my cottagers. I will only send you to wholesome cottages, and really deserving people. But, as they are all good churchmen, I want you to come to church first. They are sure to talk to you about the church services, and you will be embarrassed, and they will be shocked if you have to say that you never go to church. I can't tell you what that means to simple people, for whom church is the ante-

chamber of Heaven. To them it is anathema, maranatha, the abomination of desolation."

"I cannot go to church," said Hester, with averted face.

"Not even to thank God for your happy life, for your marriage with the man you love?"

"No, no, no!"

"Then, my dear young lady, you lead me to think that this seemingly happy union is one for which you dare not thank God; or in plain speech that you are not Mr. Hanley's wife."

Her sobs were her only answer. All those grand theories of universal liberty, of virtue that knew not law, which she had taken to her heart of late, all she had learned at second-hand from Gerard, and at first-hand from Shelley, vanished out of her mind, and she sat by the Rector's side crushed by the weight of her sin, as deeply convinced of her own shame and worthlessness as she who knelt amidst the accusing Pharisees and waited for the punishment of the old law, unexpectant of the new law of pardon.

"I am sorry for you, my dear young lady, deeply and truly sorry. You were not born for a life of degradation."

"There is no degradation," protested Hester, through her tears; "my love for him and his for me is too complete and true ever to mean degradation. He has read much and thought much, and has got beyond old codes and worn-out institutions. I am as much and as truly his wife as if we had been married in your church yonder."

"But you are not his lawful wife, and other wives, down to the humblest peasant woman in this village, will think badly of you, and all Christian women will think you a sinner—a sinner to be pitied and loved perhaps, but a sinner all the same. Why should that be? There is no other tie, I hope? Mr. Hanley is not a married man?"

"Oh no, no!"

"Thank God. Then he must marry you. It will be my duty to put the matter before him in the right light."

"Oh, pray do not interfere," exclaimed Hester. "He would think I had come to you to complain—he would love me less, perhaps—would think me designing, selfish, caring only for myself. There is nothing in life I care for but his

happiness, and he is perfectly happy now. He knows that I am devoted to him, that I would give my life for him—— ”

“ You have given your honour—that to such a woman as you is sometimes more than life.”

“ Honour or life, I could not count the cost of either for his sake.”

“ And he must be a villain if he can refuse to give you back to the position from which you have fallen—for his sake.”

“ It will come—it will come in time. I feel that he will do what is right—in his own good time.”

“ You cannot afford to wait for that. You are far too good to occupy your present position for another day or hour, unless your betrayer will consent to make wrong right. Pray trust me, my dear young lady. Though I am a rustic I have seen something of human nature, and I will act with discretion. I will not be precipitate.”

“ I would much rather you did not interfere. You don't know him. He is wayward and fanciful—you may turn him against me—and we are so happy now—utterly happy—and it

may be only for a short time. He has been told that he may die young. When he has gone all my life may be one long repentance—one long atonement for having made his last years happy.”

“My poor child, women have a natural bent for self-sacrifice, which too often leads them into sin. Come, come, my dear, don’t cry; and remember whatever may happen I mean to be your friend.”

Hester sighed. The circle of perfect love—that narrow, isolated spot in the universe in which she had been living for the last seven weeks was broken in upon suddenly from the outside world, and everything in this golden dream of hers took new lights and new colours when looked at by other eyes. In that sweet solitude of two, they had been like Hero and Leander, like Rosalind and Orlando, like any two creatures who exist only for each other, and for whom all the rest of creation is no more than a picturesque background to that dual life. Love in its first brief intensity scarcely believes in that outer world.

“Yes, my dear, however this story of yours

may end—and I hope and believe it will not end badly—you may rely upon my friendship,” said the Rector, “and if you want a woman’s help or counsel my old maiden sister will not withhold it from you. When the world was thirty years younger I had a young wife whom I adored, and who had something of your complexion and contour, and a baby daughter. Before my little girl was three years old God took her; and her mother, who had been in weak health from the time of the child’s birth, died within a year of our loss. Those two angel faces have followed me down the vale of years. I never see a child of my daughter’s age without a little thrill of tenderness or pity. I never see an interesting girl of your age without thinking that my little girl might have grown up like her. So you see, Mrs. Hanley, I have a reason for being interested in you over and above my duty as a parish priest.”

“You are all that is kind,” faltered Hester, “and I wish I were worthier——”

“It is not you who are unworthy. No, I will say no more, lest I should seem harsh to one you love. May I walk part of the way home with you?”

"I shall be very pleased to have your company, but I have a boat close by."

"Then let me take you to your boat?"

He went with her to a little reedy inlet, where she had moored her dinghy, and he stood on the bank and watched her as she sculled the light boat away towards the setting sun, with the easy air of one used to the work.

"Poor child," sighed the Rector. "How strange that one is so apt to feel more interested in a sinner than in a saint. It is the mystery of human life that takes one's fancy, perhaps; the sinner's appeal to pity, as against the saint's confidence in her own holiness. I suppose that is why Mary Magdalene is the most popular character in the Gospel."

Hester rowed slowly up the sunlit river, creeping close in shore by the stunted willows which spread their low shadows across the water. She crept into the shadow as the wounded deer creeps away to die, stricken to the heart by her conversation with Mr. Gilstone. It was the first time she had been brought face to face with stern reality since she had allowed her lover to

lead her by the hand into the fool's paradise of unsanctioned love. He had taught her to believe that the sanction meant very little, and that the loyalty and unselfishness of a mutual attachment were an all-sufficient proof of its purity; but these modern views of his did not stand by her for a quarter of an hour under the earnest interrogation of a village parson. All her old-fashioned ideas, her reverence for God's word, her shrinking from man's disdain, rushed back into her mind, and Philosophy and Free Thinking were scattered to the winds. She stood confessed a woman dishonoured by the sacrifice love had exacted from her. She looked back to those quiet evenings by the river, when she and her father had walked up and down in the starlight, with Gerard Hillersdon beside them, sympathetic, respectful almost to reverence. Ah, what bliss it had been to listen or to talk with him in that tranquil hour when the burden of daily care had been laid down! What unalloyed happiness, without thought or fear of the future—without regret for the past.

How altered now were her thoughts, when to look back upon the past was horror, when to

think of the future filled her whole being with aching fear.

This had been one of her rare days of solitude, and it was ending badly. Gerard had left for London after their leisurely breakfast, and was not to return till the eight o'clock dinner. Business or whim had urged him to spend a day in the metropolis—to lunch at one of his clubs, and to hear the gossip of town and country from men who were “passing through”—to breathe that more piquant atmosphere of the world in which everybody knows everybody else's latest secret. The freshness and the quiet of the country would be all the more delicious, he told himself, after that brief plunge into the dust and movement of the town.

Hester had not pouted or looked sorrowful at his departure, but the day had been sorely long; and now this chance meeting with the Rector had filled her with sadness and apprehension—dread lest he should break the spell that held their tranquil lives, by a vain interposition upon her behalf. And then came the agonising thought that her lover, in spite of a devotion that seemed all-absorbing, did not love her well

enough to make her his wife. Sophistry might make their union seem beautiful without the bond of marriage; but still that question remained unanswered—Why were they not married?

At this quiet evening hour, perhaps one of the saddest in Hester's life, there came suddenly upon her the sound of laughter—a man's frank laughter, joyous as the song of birds, joyous almost to ecstasy; and round the bend of the river a steam launch, gaily decked with crimson draperies and Oriental cushions, came quickly towards her, with the figures of its occupants defined against the brightness of the western sky. Foremost of the group stood the tall and lissom form of a young man with yellowish auburn hair and sharply cut features, and grouped about him were women in light summer gowns and airy hats, and other young men in white flannels. A ripple of laughter and joyous voices went past her as they passed, and then above it all rose that same mirthful laugh she had heard before the boat came in sight. The laughter of the man with auburn hair and pale, sharp-cut face was wafted up the river, in the wake of the boat, on the soft evening air. That

joyous group of youthful strangers touched her with a keener sense of her own loneliness; her father mysteriously vanished out of her life; the friendship of all old friends for ever forfeited by her conduct; nothing and no one left to her save the man for whom she had surrendered all. If he should grow weary of her, if he should change, what had she on earth? Nothing! Her glances turned involuntarily to one deep shadowy pool she knew of under an inward curve of the bank. Nothing but death! And in the new dispensation of Darwin, Spencer, and Clifford, death by suicide was no more terrible than death by inevitable decay. There was no afterwards. There was no Great Father outside this little world to whom the self-destroyer had to render up his account.

At a quarter to eight came the glad sound of wheels—sound for which Hester had been listening for the last half-hour, and two minutes later Gerard was in the lamp-lit hall, amidst the cool freshness of newly cut roses, and Hester was in his arms, faltering her fond welcome between tears and laughter.

"Why, my darling, you are almost hysterical. This won't do, Hettie."

"The day has been so long. But you are home at last," she sighed, drying her tears, the first he had seen since one stormy burst of weeping which he must needs remember all his life; the passionate tears of a woman betrayed by the man she loved too well to punish, even by her resentment.

"Home at last—home by the very train and at the very hour I named—and uncommonly glad to be home, sweet wife!"

How glibly he pronounced the name—and yet, and yet, she blushed at the sound, as she had not done since its novelty had worn off, and she accepted the gospel of free thought. All that the good old parson had said to her was in her mind that night, though she smiled and brightened and grew happy in the companionship of the man she adored.

He had come home laden with gifts for her—books, trinkets—not valuable gems, since she steadfastly refused any such gifts—but the light and airy inventions of modern art—new settings of moonstones or starstones, fairylike silver hair-

pins, ornaments that would be worthless when their fashion was past, dainty toys and trifles to scatter about the tables, eccentricities in silver and enamel, Dresden china bonbon boxes, Japanese idols.

“Throw them into the river if you don’t like them,” he said, as they sat at the cosy round table after dinner, with the lamplight shining upon the glittering toys which Gerard produced one after another from a capacious leather bag, taking childlike pleasure in Hester’s wondering admiration. “I am growing richer and richer—appallingly rich. My stocks and shares were chosen with such extraordinary foresight by that marvellous old man with the umbrella that the value of them has gone on increasing ever since he bought them. My Rosarios, my South-Westerns, my Waterworks, British and Foreign, my London Guarantee Shares—everything I own has an upward tendency. I cannot spend a quarter of my income, unless I do something wild and foolish. Think of something, Hester! Imagine some mad, delightful escapade which would cost us twenty thousand pounds. We must launch out somehow!”

"I can imagine nothing so wild or so foolish as my love for you," said Hester, growing suddenly thoughtful, "for when you cease to care for me I must die. There will be nothing left."

"Cease to care for you! While there is consciousness here"—touching his forehead—"that will never be!"

"And you really love me—with all your heart?"

"With all my heart, and mind, and strength. There's the Church Catechism for you. I am surprised I can remember so much of it."

CHAPTER IX.

“AS GENTLE AND AS JOCUND AS A JEST.”

MR. GILSTONE thought long and seriously of his interview with the young lady who was known to Lowcombe as Mrs. Hanley. In his many years' widowhood, during which his maiden sister Tabitha had cared for his creature comforts, kept his servants in order, maintained a spotless propriety throughout his roomy old house, and assisted him with counsel and manual labour in his cherished garden and churchyard, her mind had become the other half of his mind, and he had no secrets from her, not even the secrets of other people; so within a few hours of that conversation in God's Acre Tabitha Gilstone knew as much about Mrs. Hanley as her brother had been able to discover.

Tabitha was not surprised to hear that there

was something wrong. That had been decided by the consentient voices of Lowcombe some weeks ago. Tabitha sorrowed for this poor young woman, as she always sorrowed for human error, with its inevitable sequence of human suffering, most especially when the sinner was young, and perhaps with just one extra touch of tenderness when the sinner was fair. She was sorrowful, but she was not surprised. She was not one of those women who are quick to pronounce the female sinner a calculating minx; and the male sinner an artless victim. She felt very angry with the unknown owner of the Rosary, and denounced him in unmeasured terms. "The scoundrel," she cried, "not content with having brought disgrace upon a pretty, refined young creature, he must needs try to pervert her mind. First he makes her an outcast, and then he makes her an Atheist.

"Don't be too hard, Bertha," remonstrated the Rector. "I dare say Mr. Hanley does not think he is doing any wrong in introducing this poor girl to the new learning. He thinks that he is leading her into the light of truth, not into the darkness of infidelity. You don't know how

arrogant the new school of agnosticism is, how confident in materialism as the royal road to the well-being of mankind. For us who believe the unbelievers can find nothing but contemptuous pity. I expect to find this young man a difficult subject. He has been spoilt by too much wealth and a little learning."

"But you will do all you can, Basil," urged Miss Gilstone. "You will persuade him to behave honourably; or if he is wicked enough to refuse, I hope you will persuade that poor girl to leave him at once and for ever. Let her come to us if she is friendless; I will find a home for her, either in this house or with some of my friends."

"Ah, Tabitha, how many girls have we ever succeeded in turning from the way of evil while there were any flowers along the path? It is only when they come to the thorns and briers that they can be persuaded to turn back. However, I mean to do my uttermost in this case."

"And how much good you have done in such cases, Basil; how many happy wives and mothers on the other side of the world have to thank

you that they are not outcasts in the streets of London ! ”

The keen impression made by her conversation with the Rector wore off as the dreamy days went by, and Hester once more was happy, and unashamed of her happiness, like Eve in Eden. The river was still at its loveliest, and Gerard and Hester spent the greater part of their days in a punt moored in some romantic backwater, or by some willowy eyot, he stretched in sybarite idleness among silken cushions, she reading aloud to him. She had a beautiful voice, and by long habit reading aloud had become very easy to her. Together in this way they dipped into W. K. Clifford and Herbert Spencer, Comte, and Mill—he picking out chapters or essays for her to read, she accepting meekly whatever he put before her as the best. They read the poets also, in these golden afternoons, when there was just enough of coolness to make the west wind crisp and pleasant, and no hint of a wind from the east.

One morning she happened to mention the launch, and the fair-haired, pale-faced young

man whose joyous laughter had intensified her sadness.

"I felt very despondent that afternoon," she said, "and his laughter saddened me."

"Describe him to me again, Hester," said Gerard. "Stay." He sketched a profile lightly on the fly-leaf of a book, and handed the book to her. "Was your laughing youth like that?"

"Yes," she cried wonderingly, "that is the very face. You know him, then?"

"Yes, I know him."

He took a letter out of his pocket, and re-read it frowningly, a letter that had come to him with his last batch from the Post Office at Reading.

"What has become of you? Where are you hiding yourself?" wrote Justin Jermyn. "Surely you are tired of your Garden of Eden by this time. I heard of you in London the other day, so you have not carried your bliss to some untrodden valley where the novelty of your environment might prolong the freshness of your feelings. I can fancy no impassioned love lasting more than six weeks. The strain upon mind and imagination is too great.

“May not one see you? Is your happiness too sacred for the vulgar eye of a friend? I feel sure the dear young lady would like *me*, however she may object to the ruck of your acquaintance—and for the rest I am discretion itself—a very lion’s mouth for any secret you may drop into me; as deep, as silent as that deep water near the Church of St. George the Greater, where the enemies of the Venetian Republic sleep so soundly. Seriously, I am pining to see you. Tell me when and where I am to go to you. Remember, there is a mystic sympathy which links your life to mine. You cannot escape me. Whether you will or no, in your joys and in your sorrows, I shall be near you.—Yours for life, “J. J.”

A hateful letter to Gerard in his present mood, rendered still more hateful by the idea that Justin Jermyn might be his near neighbour.

“Did you see the name of the launch?” he asked.

“No; I only noticed the young man’s face, and that the girls who were grouped about him were handsome and attractive. Is he a man whom you dislike?”

"Yes, when I am away from him. But when I am in his company he always contrives to amuse and interest me, so that, in spite of myself, he seems my dearest friend."

"I understand," said Hester. "He is very clever—but not a good man. And yet he had such a joyous laugh, and seemed so happy."

"My dearest, do you think only the good people are happy. Some of the most joyous spirits in this world have gone along with hearts utterly and innately bad."

They were taking tea on the lawn a day or two after this conversation, their rustic table and restful wicker chairs grouped under a great weeping ash which had once been the chief feature of the cottage garden, when a boat shot rapidly towards the rustic landing stage, and a lissom form appeared upon the steps, and came with airy footsteps, mercurial, vivid as light, across the close-shorn turf.

"At last," cried Justin Jermyn. "I thought I could not be mistaken."

"In whom, or in what?" asked Gerard, starting to his feet and contemplating the uninvited guest with a most forbidding frown.

“In my old friend Mr. Hanley. I am staying with Matt Muller, the landscape painter, on his house-boat hard by Wargrave; and I heard, casually, the description of a certain Mr. and Mrs. Hanley, who are in some wise a mystery to the neighbourhood—the lady exquisitely beautiful (with a bow and a smile for Hester), the gentleman inordinately rich, young, idle—all that my dear friend Gerard is, in short. So I made a shrewd guess as to Mr. Hanley’s identity, and—*me voici*. Pray present me to Mrs. Hanley.”

He stood before them smiling, self-assured, light as Ariel himself, clad from top to toe in white, and with glints of sunlight in his blonde hair, and a delicate transparency in his blonde complexion, untouched by wind or weather. He looked as if nothing were further from his thoughts than the suspicion that his company could be in any wise distasteful.

Hester had risen in confusion, and stood leaning a little against one of the low branches of the ash, blushing painfully. This was the first visitor who had broken the spell of their sweet solitude, and, as in her meeting with the Rector, she felt again the sharp bitter sense of being brought

face to face with that outer world which could but think ill of her.

“Mr. Jermyn—my wife,” said Gerard, gravely, with emphasis upon the word wife.

Justin Jermyn dropped into one of the low chairs, settled himself in a nest of dainty Moorish cushions, and waited to be refreshed with tea, which Hester prepared for him with hands which trembled a little, despite her efforts at self-control. In her conversation with the Rector the sense of the old man’s fatherly pity had been more than she could bear without tears. In the presence of Justin Jermyn that which she felt was the sense of hidden malignity, the consciousness of being despised and made light of by the man who fawned upon her.

She handed him his cup in silence, offered him the light dainties from the prettily decked table with the air of performing a social duty in which her inclination had no part, and when she had done this she opened a big Florentine umbrella, and walked slowly away, leaving the two men under the ash.

“How shy she is,” said Jermyn, looking after her, “and how lovely. Even your rapturous

tirades had hardly prepared me for so much beauty. Yes, it is the true Raffaele face—the transparent purity of colouring—the delicate and harmonious features——”

“Why did you hunt me down here?” demanded Gerard, rudely breaking in upon these encomiums. “Do you suppose that when a man has made a paradise for himself—remote and secret—he wants to be intruded upon by——”

“The serpent,” interrupted Jermyn. “Perhaps not. Yet the serpent always finds his way in through some gap in the hedge. And after all there must be limits to the pleasures of a dual solitude. Love may remain unchanged, but ideas become exhausted, and the *tête-à-tête* begins to bore. If the serpent hadn’t upset everything at an early stage in their union, how heartily sick of Eden Adam and Eve must have become by the time Cain and Abel were weaned. Don’t be angry, Gerard. Granted that I am a pushing cad, and that I go where I like to go rather than where I am wanted. I come to you with all the news of the town—of the world—fresh in my mind, the scandals, and follies, and the social entanglements of which your newspapers tell you

nothing. You can surely put up with me for an hour or so."

Gerard put up with him till midnight. He dined at the Rosary, and the little dinner of three had a gaiety which the *tête-à-tête* dinners had somewhat lacked lately. Even Hester was amused by a style of conversation that was new to her, and the unpleasant effect of Mr. Jermyn's personality wore off, and was almost forgotten. He evidently liked and admired Gerard, and that was much in his favour.

The moon was at the full, silvering wood and meadow, river and eyot, as they bade the visitor good night, and stood and watched him row down the stream towards Wargrave, a ghost-like figure in his white raiment, under that cold white light.

"He amused you, Gerard," said Hester, as they walked slowly back to the house. "I was glad to hear you laugh so merrily. We have been too serious of late. Our books have saddened us."

"Yes, they all tell the same story; that nature is everything and we are nothing. Jermyn is an amusing rascal, and as I told you yesterday, I like him well enough when I am with him."

"You called me your wife when you introduced him to me," murmured Hester, hiding her face upon his shoulder. "You will never let him find out that I am—anything less than your wife—will you, Gerard? I feel as if that man's scorn would wither me."

"His scorn! My dearest, he admires you beyond measure, and do you think he is the kind of man to be influenced in his opinion of any woman by a marriage certificate? He knows that I adore you. He shall never know anything else about us but that we are devoted to each other. And if he is ever wanting in reverence for you, in the smallest degree, he shall never enter our house again."

CHAPTER X.

“COMPARE DEAD HAPPINESS WITH LIVING
WOE.”

AFTER that one evening's hospitable entertainment Mr. Jermyn considered himself free of the Rosary. He dropped in at any hour he liked, and always brought cheerfulness with him. He joined Hester and Gerard in their long, lazy mornings in the punt, discussed their books, old and new, seeming to know every book that had ever made its mark in the world, and to remember, as few readers remember. Gerard was certainly the gayer for his company, and listened with interest to an account of the visitors on the *Pegotty*, where Matt Muller received a society that could only be described as mixed. Happily the *Pegotty* was berthed at a distance of ten miles,

and the painter's Bohemian guests rarely went over a mile beyond her moorings.

All the dreamy seriousness that had tintured Hester and Gerard's long duologue evaporated in the presence of Justin Jermyn, as the mist wreaths melt from the riverside meadows under the broadening sunshine. The greatest problems in life and time were touched as lightly by Jermyn as the airiest nothings of tea-table gossip. It was impossible to be earnest in the society of a man for whom existence was a jest, and the Sybarite's luxury the supreme good below the stars.

"If I ever contemplate another world, it appears to me as a planet in which there is perpetual summer; a place where there are no bad cooks, and where the fowls of the air have no legs," he said, with his joyous laugh, when Hester pleaded for that last forlorn hope of man's progressive existence, somewhere, somehow.

Mr. Gilstone called twice at the Rosary during these halcyon days at the beginning of October, only to find that Mr. and Mrs. Hanley were out on the river. Gerard tossed the Rector's cards aside with a contemptuous laugh on the second time of finding them on the hall table.

"What pushing rascals these parsons are," he exclaimed. "This fellow calls twice in ten days, instead of taking offence at my neglect. Wants money out of me for his schools, or his coal-club, no doubt. Well, the parson's life is not a happy life, as I know by home experience, and I'll reward his pertinacity with a comfortable cheque."

Hester turned red, and then pale, at the sight of the Rector's cards.

"He may not want money," she faltered.

"May not! My dearest, he is a priest. The priest who doesn't go for your purse is a black swan that I don't expect to find along this river."

"He may wish to see you."

"Then his wish shall remain ungratified. I am not going to let the world into our paradise by the thin end of the clerical wedge."

"You need not fear the world," Hester answered, with the first touch of bitterness that Gerard had heard in any speech of hers. "People know that there is something wrong in our lives. They have all held themselves aloof."

"The voice is the voice of my poetic Hester, but the words are the words of the Philistine," said Gerard, lightly, as he left her.

She stood looking at the Rector's cards, lying far apart where Gerard's careless hand had flung them. She felt that she had offended the man whom she loved better than all the world besides. Oh, fool, self-conscious fool, to care for what that shallow or self-seeking world might think or say of her. Whatever she had sacrificed of womanly pride and self-respect, was it not enough reward to have made him happy—him for whom life was to be so brief, who had need to crowd into a few summers the love and gladness which for other men may be spread over the length of prosaic years, making a little spot of colour and light here and there on the dull grey woof of domestic monotony.

The Rector called a third time, and this time met the master of the house at the hall door.

"Good morning, Mr. Gilstone. Pray step inside my den here," said Gerard, throwing aside his hat. "I am ashamed that you should have troubled to pay me a third visit. I was on the point of sending you a cheque."

"I have not asked you for any money, Mr. Hanley," answered the Rector, gravely, seating himself in the proffered chair, and looking round

the room with the shrewd glance of eyes that have been observing things for sixty-six years.

There was nothing in the cottage parlour, transformed into a study, to indicate dissipated habits; none of the slovenliness of the Bohemian idler. Many books, flowers everywhere, and an all-pervading neatness distinguished the apartment.

"You have not asked me? No, no," said Gerard, lightly, "but I know that in an agricultural parish there must be a good deal of poverty, and every well-to-do parishioner should pay his quota. Winter is approaching, though we may be beguiled into forgetting all about him in this delicious autumn. You are thinking of your coal and blanket club, I dare say. Allow me to write you a cheque." He opened a drawer, took out his cheque-book, and dipped his pen in the ink.

"No, Mr. Hanley," said the Rector, decisively; "I cannot take your money. I am here to talk to you of something much more precious than money."

"Of my soul, perhaps?" questioned Gerard, his countenance hardening. "I may as well tell

you at once, Mr. Gilstone, that I am an unbeliever in the Christian revelation, and, indeed, in transcendentalism of all kinds."

"You are a Darwinian, I conclude?"

"No; I am nothing! I neither look before nor after. I want to make the most of life in the present, while it is mine. God knows, it is short enough for the longest lived amongst us--and death comes no easier to me, the unit, because I know the universe is working steadily towards the same catastrophe."

"You dread death?" asked the Rector.

"Who does not? Contemplate death in whatever form you will, he is the same hideous spectre. Sudden destruction, slow decay? Who shall say which is the more terrible? But come now, Mr. Gilstone, you are not here to talk metaphysics. I say again, let me write you a cheque for your schools, your cottage hospital, your something."

"And I say again, Mr. Hanley, that I cannot take your money."

"Why not?"

"I cannot take money for alms from a man who is living in sin."

"Oh, that's your drift, is it, sir?" cried Gerard,

springing to his feet. "You force yourself into my house in order to insult me!"

"No, Mr. Hanley. I am here in the hope of helping you to mend your life."

"What right have you to suppose that my life needs mending?"

"Say that it is only the shrewdness of an old man who has lived long enough to know something of human nature. Two young people with ample means do not live as you and Mrs. Hanley are living without some reason for their isolation, and in your case I take it the reason is that the lady is not your wedded wife. If that is so, let me, while your relations are still unknown to the world at large, marry you to this young lady, quietly, some morning, with no witness but my sexton and my dear old maiden sister, both of whom know how to keep a secret."

"My dear Mr. Gilstone, you are vastly obliging; but I am really a little amused at your *naïveté*. Do you really forget—suppose I am not legally married to the lady I call my wife—that there are plenty of registrars in England who would marry me to her as quietly as you can, and make no favour of the business."

"I do not ignore the existence of registry offices where any groom in the county may be married to his master's daughter at a day or two's notice; but I think Mrs. Hanley would prefer to stand by your side at the altar, and to be married to you according to the ordinances of the Church."

"I do not think Mrs. Hanley has any profound belief in those ordinances. She is satisfied with the knowledge that she possesses my whole heart, and that her love has made me happy."

"And you accept her too willing sacrifice of virtue and good name, and reserve to yourself the privilege of deserting her when you are weary of her."

"You have no right to talk to me in this strain."

"Yes, Mr. Hanley, I have a right—the right of an old man and a parish priest, the right which comes from my deep pity for that innocent-looking girl whom you have made your victim. I have talked with her, and every word she uttered helped to assure me that she was not created to be happy in a life of sin. She is not the kind of woman to accept such a life readily—there must

have been more than common art in the seducer who betrayed her——”

“Hold your tongue, sir,” cried Gerard passionately. “How dare you pry into the lives of a man and woman whom you see united and happy ; who ask nothing from you ; neither your friendship nor your countenance ; nothing except to be let alone. My wife—the wife of my heart and of my home—the wife I shall never forsake—is satisfied with her position, and neither you nor any one else has the right to interfere in her behalf. Your priesthood involves no privileges for one to whom all creeds are alike mischief-making and superstitious?”

“I have been taught that the men who set aside old creeds have adopted humanitarianism as their religion,” said the Rector ; “but there is not much humanity in your reckless sacrifice of this young lady—who, I say again, was born for better things than to be—— anything less honoured than your wife.”

“You have talked with her?” said Gerard, suddenly ; “when and where?”

“I found her in the churchyard one afternoon, and we had a little quiet talk together.”

"I understand ; just enough to make her unhappy, and absurdly sensitive upon a question which I thought she and I had settled for ever," retorted Gerard, angrily. "Did she ask you to call upon me? Are you her ambassador?"

"No. She is only too unselfish. You do not look like a scoundrel, Mr. Hanley, and your conduct in this matter is a mystery to me. You are rich, independent. Why should you refuse to legalise a tie which you own has made you happy? Is there any impediment? Are you married already?"

"I have no wife but Hester."

"But you have some reason——?"

"Yes, I have my reason—and as I do not believe in priestcraft or in father-confessors you must pardon me, Mr. Gilstone, if I refuse to explain that reason to you, a total stranger, whose sympathy, or whose curiosity, I have not invited."

"Enough, Mr. Hanley. I am sorry for that illused young lady, about whose conscience and whose social status you are equally indifferent. If you should alter your determination and make up your mind to act as a man of honour, you

may command me in any way or at any time; but until you do so I shall not again cross your threshold."

"So be it—but pray bear in mind, Rector, that you have crossed my threshold unasked, and that you cannot expect me to be appalled at your threat of withholding an acquaintance which I never sought."

He rang for the servant, and himself accompanied the Rector to the hall door, where they parted with ceremonious politeness.

He was angry with this stranger's intrusion upon his life, angry with Hester for having betrayed their secret. She came in from the garden directly after Mr. Gilstone's departure, fluttered and pale, having seen the Rector going out at the gate.

For the first time Gerard received her with a frowning brow, and in gloomy silence.

"The Rector has been with you," she said timidly, seating herself in her accustomed nook by the window, where she had her work-basket and little book-table.

Gerard was slow to answer. She had time to take her work out of the basket, and to put in a few tremulous stitches before he spoke.

“Yes, the Rector has been here—an old acquaintance of yours it seems.”

“Not very old, Gerard. I have only spoken to him once in my life.”

“Only once; and in that once you contrived to make him acquainted with all your grievances.”

“Gerard, how cruelly you speak. I told him nothing—nothing. He guessed that all was not well—that I was living a life which, in his sight, is a life of sin. Oh, Gerard, don’t be hard upon me. I have never worried you with my remorse for my own weakness, but when that good old man talked to me so kindly, so gently——”

“You played the tearful Magdalen—allowed a bigoted old Pharisee to humiliate you by his pitying patronage—sent him to me to urge me to legalise our union—to legalise, forsooth! As if law ever held love.”

“I did not send him to you. I begged him not to interfere.”

“You could at least have told me of your conversation with this man, and so prepared me for being sermonised.”

“I could not speak of it, Gerard. There are things one cannot speak of.”

She bent very low over her work to hide her tears, feeling instinctively that tears would be hateful to him in his present humour. In all the days they had spent together she had kept tears and sadness to herself. For him she had been all sunshine.

He took two or three impatient turns in the small room, where the cramped space only irritated him.

"Hester, are you tired of me, and our life here?" he asked, stopping suddenly in front of the window by which she was seated.

"Tired! Gerard, you know my life begins and ends with you. I have given up everything else—this world and the next. I have nothing to care about, nothing to hope for but you."

"If I were free to marry you I should need no priestly bidding; but I am not free. I am bound hard and fast by an old tie, which I cannot loosen, yet awhile at any rate. I may be able hereafter to free myself—without dishonour: or I may never be free."

"Do not speak of it, Gerard. I have asked nothing of you. Mr. Gilstone believed that he had a duty to do. He has done it. That is all."

Her gentle patience touched him. He seated himself by her side, took the work out of the unsteady hands which were only spoiling it, and drew her to his heart.

“You are only too good to me, Hester,” he said, “let us be happy, dearest, happy in spite of the conventionalities, happy as Shelley and his Mary were, in the beginning of their union, before law had set its seal upon the bond of love. Some day Church and State may seal our marriage—but it will make the bond no stronger.”

He had not forgotten what the Rector had said of her. Yes, she was of the stuff of which wives are made. She was not the kind of woman to accept degradation easily. And then he told himself that there was no degradation in their union, that he was a fool to consider the world’s opinion, or be influenced by the narrow views of a village parson.

After that day there was no word spoken by either Gerard or Hester of the Rector’s visit. He came no more to the Rosary, nor did any one else in the parish call upon the new-comers. Perhaps the involuntary look of distress in Mr. Gilstone’s

countenance, when Mr. and Mrs. Hanley were again discussed at a village tea-drinking, may have confirmed his parishioners in their suspicions of evil. The old speculations were repeated, the old assertion was reiterated, to the effect that people who did not desire to be visited or to visit must be innately bad, and the Rector held his peace. He started a new subject, and even affected not to know that any one had been talking about the Hanleys. He was sore at heart when he thought of that fair and lovable girl, before whom the future seemed so dark an outlook.

For Hester the world was not quite what it had been before her conversation with the Rector. An unspeakable sadness stole over her spirits when she remembered the bitter shame of that hour in which she found herself face to face with an orthodox follower of the Gospel, and saw her position as it looked in his eyes. A gnawing remorse had fastened upon her heart. She looked back with sick regret to the days of poverty and hard labour, the long walks through the arid streets, the long hours at her sewing-machine, and all the little domestic cares

that had been needed to eke out scanty resources, and make her father's life comfortable. Gladly would she have gone back to the drudgery could she have been as she was then—without fear or reproach. The plethora of wealth in which she lived—the flowers, the frivolities, the wastefulness which she had no power to control, shocked and pained her. She felt like an Indian wife in some luxurious zenana, helpless, hopeless, irresponsible. The fact that her future was amply provided for, a fact of which Gerard had assured her in the most delicate manner, gave her no satisfaction. She could not conceive the possibility of life when he was gone.

She bore her burden in silence. He for whom she had sacrificed religion and good name never knew of those long watches of the night in which her thoughts were full of sadness. He never saw her tears or heard her complain of all that was painful in her position at the Rosary. The October days drew in; the harmony in red and gold and russet, which had made autumnal woods lovelier than summer foliage, gradually faded to the dull grey of

winter. At every breath of the wind the dead leaves came gently showering down, with sound as faint as a snowfall, and all the upper branches of beech and elm were bare, while here and there some sturdy oak still spread boughs of red or gold against the iron sky.

The days were short, and often too cold for idle hours upon the river. Scarcely had the wintry sun sloped toward the westward curve of the reedy shore when the pale mist of night began to creep over the meadows and along the river, until it slowly rose and wrapped house and garden in one dense cloud. Hester's tender care guarded Gerard from those river fogs with strictest watchfulness, for had not he told her Dr. South's poor opinion of his lungs. Thus the long evenings might have hung heavily upon them both had they not both been students, for whom the longest life would have been only too short for the unexplored, inexhaustible world of books. To study the catalogues of booksellers, to read the advertisements of new books in the *Athenæum*, and to order every book that took his fancy made one unfailing source of amusement for Gerard Hil-

lersdon, and with these long, quiet evenings old ambitions revived. He would write a novel—he would write that narrative poem which had been simmering in his mind for years, that story in verse which was to have all the depth of Browning and all the delicacy of Tennyson, all the dash, wit, and chic of Owen Meredith, with all the passion of Swinburne, a poem which, if it succeeded, should mark a new era in poetry.

He loved to talk of his unrealised dreams, and Hester loved to listen. Thus the wintry evenings were seldom too long, and Hester, seeing him happy, felt that her sacrifice had not been in vain, and told herself again and again that her own feelings were as nothing when weighed against his content.

He went up to London one bright October day, and saw Dr. South, who expressed himself altogether hopefully.

“You have been taking life easily,” he said, “and the result is all I could wish, more than I hoped. Your heart is better, your lungs are stronger. We cannot give you a new heart, but we can make the old one wear much longer

than I thought possible the last time I saw you. Frankly, you were in a very bad way just then."

Gerard heard this verdict with delight. So far from being tired of this world he had a greed of life. He could contemplate old age with calmness. That season which to the mind of youth is ordinarily a jest and yet a horror had for him no terrors. He could contemplate long years of luxurious repose, in that palace of art which he had built for himself, and to which every year of declining life should bring new treasures. He could think of himself seated among his books, his statues, pictures, gems, curios; white-haired, white-bearded, wise with the hoarded wisdom of a long life; a man to whom young men should come as they went to Protagoras, to hear golden words of philosophic council. Fate had given him the gold which can buy such an old age as this. He thought of Samuel Rogers, of Stirling Maxwell—of the few men who seem to have drunk the wine of life to the lees, and yet to have found no bitterness in the cup; and he saw before him the possibility of a life as perfect

as theirs, could but life itself hold out. That was the one all-absorbing desire—to keep the bond intact between consciousness and this clay—without which he had been taught to believe consciousness must cease to be.

He went back to the Rosary after that interview with Dr. South happier than he had been for some time. He felt his youth renewed, the shadow of impending doom removed from his path. He was more than ever devoted to Hester. He told her the doctor's opinion, and kissed away her tears of joy.

In Devonshire there had been some anxiety about him. Mr. and Mrs. Hillersdon had returned from a long stay at Royat and a delightful tour in the south-west of France. They were now installed at the Rectory, where Lilian was occupied with preparations for her marriage.

“Mother is very disappointed to hear that you are not coming to us before Christmas,” wrote Lilian. “She wants to thank you for all the pleasure your money has afforded her and father; and to tell you how easy and luxurious our travels were made by your generous gift.

For my part I have worlds to tell you, and I shall be unhappy till we meet. We stayed three days in town, for father to see his old friends at the clubs and to dine with some clerical bigwigs, and for mother and me to do our shopping, which was tremendous. We went on the very first morning to Hillersdon House, and it was a blow to find that you were not there or likely to be there for an indefinite time. Your servants were rather mysterious about you—servants love mystery, don't they? Your paragon housekeeper was at Brighton, your butler had gone for an airing in the Park. The footman did not know your address, but told me in the most condescending way that our letters would be forwarded to you; so I live in the hope that you will receive this letter somewhere, by land or sea, in a shooting-lodge in the Highlands, or on a Norwegian lake.

“I am very unhappy about that poor girl in whose fate you were as much—or almost as much—interested as I was. I mean Hester Davenport. After having failed in finding you, I drove to Chelsea, hoping to find Hester. I wanted to take her to lunch with mother at

the Alexandra, and then to a picture gallery, just to make a little break in her monotonous life. But I found her rooms empty, and her landlady was very doleful about her. She left one morning in the middle of August; paid what was owing, put together a few things in a Gladstone bag, sent her landlady's little boy for a cab, and drove off, heaven knows where. Her father had disappeared mysteriously a few days before, and the landlady thought this had upset poor Hester. She was very much agitated when leaving, quite unlike her usual self. She gave no address, but a fortnight afterwards the landlady received a few lines from her, telling her to send any letters that might be waiting for her, addressed to H., at the Post Office, Reading. Two of Whiteley's men came about the same time with an order from Hester, packed up all her books, her father's clothes and belongings, in two deal cases, addressed them to the South-Western Station, Reading, to be called for, and left them ready for the railway people to take away. Nothing more has been heard of Hester or her father at their old lodgings. The landlady cried when

she talked of them, and she evidently thinks there is something wrong. I have a good mind to write to Hester, and address my letter to the Reading Post Office, and yet what can I say to her? It is all so mysterious; first the old man's disappearance, and then her sudden flight. It seemed like a flight, did it not?

"Jack was very glad to see us on our return. He has been working hard all the summer, has had neither holiday nor change of air; but now he is coming down to Helmsleigh for the harvest festival, and we are all going to be very happy. We want you to complete our happiness."

Gerard destroyed this letter directly he had read it, knowing how these words of his sister would have distressed Hester. She had spoken of Lilian very rarely, and he had heard the deep regret in her tone, the sorrow for the loss of a friendship that had been very dear, the hopelessness of that friendship's renewal. Not for worlds would he have her reminded of the morning of her flight, with its agony of conflicting emotions, shame, regret, fond self-sacrificing love, courage to meet the worst that fate could bring, for his sake. He could recall her face now in its rigid

whiteness, as the cab drove up to the station door where he stood ready to receive her. They had parted only a few hours before in the rosy flush of morning. They were meeting now never to part again, Gerard told her, as they sat side by side in the railway carriage, careless whither the train took them on their first journey together.

Lilian's letter brought back the memory of that morning to Gerard, and with it a revival of his tenderest feelings. How gentle, how utterly unselfish she had been even in the despair which went with her surrender; how careful that he should not suffer from her remorse. He began to think seriously of trying to free himself from his promise to Edith Champion—that promise made in her husband's lifetime, and of which she had said, "Remember, it is an oath." He began to think of confessing the new tie with which he had bound himself, and appealing to Edith's generosity to release him. He thought of this, but as it was a thing which could be done at any time, he was in no haste to do it. Should new obligations arise—should there be the promise of a child to be born to him—well, in that case it

might be his duty to release himself, at any cost, from that older tie.

Justin Jermyn dropped in frequently during these shortening autumnal days, always full of animal spirits, always with his budget of little social scandals, which set everybody in a ridiculous light, and offered food for laughter. What a preposterous world it seemed, contemplated from his standpoint, and how could anybody be serious about it, or care by what slow linking together of infinitesimals, by what processes, molecular or nebular, this speck in the universe had come to be the thing it is? Hester hated his mocking talk, but she was glad to see Gerard amused within the narrow limits of the Rosary. Had there been no such visitor as Jermyn, he might have wanted to go to London oftener, perhaps. So in some wise she had reason to be grateful to Jermyn.

Matt Muller, the landscape painter, to whom the Thames had been a gold mine, was still living on his house-boat, despite those autumnal mists which were more conducive to art than to health. He was building himself a cottage and painting-room on the river bank, and had the

delightful duty of watching the bricklayers at their work. Jermyn oscillated between London and Mr. Muller's house-boat, and was always fresh and metropolitan, while the painter, he protested, had lapsed into a bovine state of being, and thought of nothing but the canvas on his easel, and the cottage that was slowly rising out of a level stretch of meadow land.

Jermyn stayed later than usual one evening after dining at the Rosary. The weather had been exceptionally fine during the last few days. This was St. Luke's summer, as Hester said, with a faint sigh, when she heard the church bells pealing along the river, and remembered the date, the eighteenth of October, St. Luke's Day—day which, in the years that were past, had seen her kneeling in her place at church; day which for her henceforth meant only the uncertified anniversary of a problematical personage.

She had spent the morning on the river with Gerard, tempted by the warmth of the sunshine which gilded meadow and islet. They had stayed out till the edge of dusk, and, creeping slowly home in their punt, had found Jermyn pacing

the lawn by the water, looking out for their return.

“I have come to offer myself for dinner,” he said, as he helped Hester out of the boat. “It is ages since I have bored you with my society—a week at the very least—and I have brought you a budget of news, Gerard; news not altogether fit for Mrs. Boffin,” shaking his finger at Hester, “so I must keep it for our half-hour in your cosy tabagie.”

“Your half-hours in the smoking-room are very long,” said Hester.

“Their length proves that I can interest Gerard. You ought to be very grateful to me, Mrs. Hanley. He would expire of ennui in this delicious retreat if I did not bring him a faithful report of all the malicious things that are done and said in London.”

“I have forgotten the meaning of the word ennui since I came to the Rosary,” said Gerard; “so you may suppress all desire to patronise us upon that score. When the leaves are all off the trees and the Thames begins to look dreary, we shall take wing for the Riviera.”

“I will meet you at Monte Carlo. I am more

at home _there than anywhere," said Jermyn, gaily.

"I doubt if we shall go to Monte Carlo."

"Oh, yes, you will. You won't go, perhaps—you'll gravitate there. It has been called the loadstone rock, don't you know. It will draw you, as that rock in the story drew the nails out of Sinbad's vessel. You will find yourself powerless against the fascination of one of the loveliest spots upon this earth. I shall be just as sure of meeting you there as Cæsar's shade was of meeting Brutus at Philippi."

The dinner passed gaily. The lamplit table was brilliant with the beauty of decay, decked with autumn leaves and berries of various and harmonious colouring, which Hester had collected that morning in a woodland walk, while the world was all fresh and dewy. The evening was so mild that the two young men were able to smoke their after-dinner cigars and enjoy their after-dinner talk pacing up and down the gravel path in front of the drawing-room, while Hester sat in the lamp-light by the hearth, where a fire of pine-logs gave a show of cheerfulness without too much heat. She had her work and her

books about her, and the girlish figure in the white gown in the brightly-furnished room made a graceful picture of home-life altogether unlike that vision of Bohemianism and debauchery which the spinsters of Lowcombe imagined within the walls of the Rosary.

“Does Mrs. Hanley go with you to the South?” inquired Jermyn, after they had exhausted his stock of London gossip, and were lapsing into thoughtfulness.

The night was even lovelier than the day had been; the sky was full of stars, and now towards ten o’clock, the late moon was rising round and golden from behind a wooded hill on the opposite shore.

“Natürlich. Did you suppose I should leave her behind?”

“I only suppose there is an end to all things. You have had a very long honeymoon.”

“We are not tired of each other yet.”

“No?” interrogatively. “And poor Mrs. Champion, whom the world declares you are to marry directly she is out of her weeds. It will be rather rough upon her if you marry any one else.”

“That is a matter for the lady’s consideration and mine—not for yours.”

“I apologise. After all the chief aim in this life is to be happy, and so long as you are happy with the lady yonder—a most lovely and amiable creature——”

“For God’s sake hold your tongue. You mean kindly to us both, I dare say—but every word you say increases my irritation.”

“My dear Hillersdon, how sensitive you are. Strange that a position which seems to have secured your happiness should not bear discussion—even with an intimate friend.”

Gerard turned upon his heel, and went back to the house, Jermyn following him, and the two young men spent the rest of the evening in the drawing-room with Hester, where their talk was no longer of living people, but of books and ideas, and of great minds that have gone out into the Unknown. Hester was always carried away by talk of this kind, carried away from remorseful brooding, from the consciousness of an abiding sorrow. In that shadowy world of speculative thought all painful feelings were merged in the one great mystery, what we are and whither we

are going; whether that individual existence, so agonisingly distinct to-day, shall to-morrow merge and melt into the infinitesimal life which builds the coral reef and recomposes the earth we tread on.

Such conversations always left her in deepest melancholy. Yet she took a morbid pleasure in them, as people do in books that make them cry.

The wood fire and the lamplight had heated the low cottage drawing-room over much before Justin Jermyn left, and when he was gone Gerard opened the window, and let in the cool soft air, and the wide sweep of moonlit sky, above a ridge of firs which bounded the landscape. The moon was high in the midmost heaven by this time, riding triumphantly amidst that glorious company of stars which look like her satellites. Hester and Gerard stood at the open window, contemplating the sky and river, glad to be alone, albeit they had not wearied of Jermyn, who had a knack of being interesting upon any subject. They were both silent, both full of thought, glad to rest after the animated discussion of the last two hours.

"Hark," said Gerard, suddenly. "Some one has opened the garden gate. Jermyn is coming back. What can he want?"

Hester's ear was quicker than his. She heard a step upon the gravel, a feeble, dragging footstep, as of one who was weary unto death.

"It is not his step," she said. "It is some one who is old and feeble."

As she spoke there came creeping out of the shadow of the shrubbery, and round by the angle of the house, a figure that had a spectral look in the moonlight which silvered the face and shone white upon the travel-stained raiment. It was the figure of an old man with ragged grey beard and tall, gaunt form. The bent shoulders, the slow movements, indicated uttermost weariness. The man came tottering towards the lamplit window, leaning upon his stick; he came closer and closer, till he was face to face with Hester, and then with a loud cry he lifted his stick and pointed at her triumphantly.

"I knew it," he cried hysterically, "I knew it was you. I knew I had found you—at last—found you in the midst of your infamy—living in luxury while your old father has been starving.

Yes, by Heaven, within an ace of starvation—living in sin——”

“Father,” cried Hester, piteously, stretching out her hands to him, trying to put her arms about him, “father, you have no cause to blame me. It was you who left me. I was giving you my life—would have given it you till my last breath—but you left me—left me without a word—alone and fatherless.”

Sobs choked her. She could say no more. She could only shape the words dumbly, while he thrust her from him with a savage gesture.

“Don’t touch me,” he cried, “I renounce you—I have done with you——”

And then from the father’s lips came one of those foul words which brand like red-hot iron. The daughter sank in an agony of shame at his feet—not fainting, only too keenly conscious of her misery.

To be called that name—and in Gerard’s hearing. What could her life be ever more after this night but one everlasting sense of shame?

Her hands were clasped over her face, as she half knelt, half crouched, upon the ground. In those few moments there was time for that one

thought, "I am that thing which he has called me." And then she heard Gerard's hoarse cry of rage, a blow, a groan, and her father had fallen like a log on the gravel path beside her.

CHAPTER XI.

“ALAS, WHY CAM’ST THOU HITHER?”

HE was not dead. Hester, in the first few minutes of helpless horror, thought that the blow which had felled her father to the ground must needs be his death blow; but it was not so. Her trembling fingers loosened the wisp of rusty black which he wore round his throat; she felt the beating of his heart under the ragged flannel shirt. She heard the stertorous breathing, which, however dreadful, at least indicated life.

“Go for the doctor,” she cried. “Oh, for God’s sake, the doctor—without the loss of a moment. You have not killed him.”

“Killed him! no. I only ventured to silence his foul tongue—the ungrateful old scoundrel. My blow was not murderous—but I meant to

silence him, and I have done it," said Gerard, with a scornful laugh.

It seemed such a worthless life to him, these poor dregs of a wasted existence. Age, poverty, drunkenness, what had such a man to live for, or how should such a man value life?—and yet if one made an end of this wretched remnant of used up humanity the act would be called murder, and one might be hanged for it.

What should be done? Send for a doctor? Yes. It was past one o'clock, and the nearest doctor was at Lowcombe, a mile off, a medical practitioner whose function it was to see a scattered population in and out of the world, a population dispersed at inconvenient distances, approachable only by accommodation roads, within a radius of six or seven miles.

"I'll go to the gardener's cottage and try to get a messenger," said Gerard. "Don't be frightened, Hester. Just keep quiet till I come back."

He ran off towards the gardener's house, on the other side of the road, adjoining a large kitchen garden where the said gardener delighted in the cultivation of a vast stock of vegetables

which nobody consumed, and in the consumption of seeds which ought to have been enough to sow vegetables over all the waste ground in Berkshire.

He was gone, and Hester's fears grew more intense as she knelt beside the motionless form, listening to the labouring breath. Had he fainted, or was it some kind of stroke which made him unconscious? She went into the house for water to bathe his temples. She tried to force a spoonful of brandy between the pallid lips, but without success. She could only watch the face, which the moonlight whitened, and note how it had aged and altered for the worse since August. Those few months had done the work of years. Every line had deepened, and there was something worse than age, the pale, dull, soddened look of the habitual drunkard.

Gerard came back after a quarter of an hour that seemed an age.

"Dowling has started," he said. "I waited till I had seen him go. It's nearly an hour's walk there and back. Your folly in setting your face against a stable has left us without

a messenger in a dilemma like this. Hasn't he got his senses back yet?"

He stood looking down at the figure stretched at full length across the pathway. The path in front of the verandah was narrow, and by a happy chance Nicholas Davenport had fallen with his head upon the edge of the lawn, where the turf was thick and soft. Gerard looked down at him with but little compunction, a sorry figure in mud-stained clothes, boots split and down at heel, trousers torn at the knees and ragged at the edge.

"I wonder whether the Rector of Lowcombe would urge me to make this man my father-in-law," thought Gerard; and then moved by some better feeling he stooped down to lift the heavy head from the ground, and with Hester's help conveyed the unconscious form into the drawing-room, and laid it on the sofa, where Hester placed a down pillow under the ragged grey hair, and spread a plush coverlet over the motionless limbs.

"Is there anything else that we can do?" she asked piteously.

"I am afraid not. I am lamentably ignorant

of all medical treatment. If Lilian were here she would be ever so much more use. I'm afraid it is some kind of fit."

"Do you think he is dying?" Hester asked, horror stricken.

She was kneeling by the sofa, holding her father's hand, which was cold and inert.

"I don't know. I know nothing, except that his fall just now can hardly have killed him."

"If it had you would have been his murderer," she said, horrified at his callousness.

"Would you have preferred me to stand by and hear him insult you—you who have been his devoted slave—who sacrificed all the joys of girlhood to his necessities."

No, he had no compunction. This dotard had broken in upon their lives, bringing horror and agitation into their peaceful home; this dotard to whom Hester owed nothing, who had been already overpaid in filial duty. He had no compunction, he the young man who had raised his hand against age and feebleness. He had no more regret for this thing that he had done than he might have felt if he had kicked a strayed mongrel from his threshold. He

was angry with the hazard of life which had brought this most ineligible visitor to his retreat, and had perhaps made a happy union with Hester impossible henceforward. He knew her exaggerated ideas of duty to this drunken log, knew her willingness to sacrifice herself. How could he tell what line she would take?

Legalise their union, forsooth! Create a legal link between himself and yonder carrion. Go through the rest of his life ticketed with a disreputable father-in-law. He could not stay in the room with that unconscious item of poor humanity. He went out and paced the 'gravel walk from end to end, and back again, and back again, with monotonous repetition, waiting for the coming of the doctor, who did not come. The gardener came back in something less than an hour, to say that the doctor had been summoned to a distant farmhouse, where there was a baby expected, and would doubtless remain there till the arrival of the baby. The farmhouse was nearly five miles on the other side of Lowcombe. All that the doctor's wife could promise was that her husband should go to the Rosary as soon as possible after his return home.

Thus, through the long October night there was nothing to be done but to wait and watch in patience. The air grew chill as morning approached, and Gerard came back to the drawing-room, where Hester had kept up the fire, and where the lamp was still burning. The old man's breathing was quieter, and he seemed now to have sunk into a heavy sleep.

"He will do well enough," said Gerard, looking at the unlovely sleeper. "There is a Providence that watches over drunkards."

"Gerard, Gerard, how cruel you are!"

"Do you expect me to be kind? I would have given thousands to keep that man out of our life."

"You gave him the money that set him on the wrong path," she said.

"I gave him money to get rid of him. I saw your life sacrificed to an imaginary claim. I saw your youth fading—your beauty with a blight upon it—the blight of poverty and care. He was the only bar to our happiness, and I swept him out of my way. We have been happy, Hester. For pity's sake don't tell

me you care more for that wreck of humanity than you care for me!"

"I care for him because he is my father, and has such sore need of my love."

"Ah, that is the old story. Well, you can go on caring for him—vicariously. We will put him in a sanatorium where his declining years will be made comfortable, and where he will be protected from his pernicious propensities."

She took no notice of this speech. She was sitting, as she had sat through the greater part of that night, holding her father's hand, stooping now and then to moisten his forehead with a handkerchief dipped in Eau-de-Cologne, listening to his breathing, hoping for the daylight and the coming of the doctor.

Daylight came at last, chilly and misty, and soon after daylight Mr. Mivor, the long-established and trusted family practitioner, was ushered into the room by a sleepy housemaid, who had heard with wonder that there was an invalid in the house—some one who had arrived unexpectedly in the night, and for whom a bedroom was to be aired and made ready. Hester had

gone upstairs at daybreak to call the servants, and had seen to the lighting of a fire in this unused bedroom, a pleasant room enough, looking out over the high road and kitchen garden to the park-like meadows beyond.

Mr. Mivor had heard various conversations about the young couple at the Rosary, but as a discreet practitioner and a man of the world had refrained from all expression of opinion. He was not the less interested in this social mystery, and his curiosity was considerably increased by what he saw this morning—those two pale faces, the man's sullen and heavy, the woman's haggard with anxiety, and between them this shabby, disreputable figure, this sodden countenance, in which the medical eye was quick to see the indications of habitual intemperance.

"When did the seizure occur?" he asked, after he had made his examination.

"Soon after one o'clock."

"Was he in good health up to that time?"

"I don't know. He came into the house—an unexpected visitor—and dropped down almost immediately. He has been unconscious ever since," Gerard answered deliberately.

“And there was no exciting cause—no quarrel, no shock of any kind?” interrogated the doctor, with a sharp look at the speaker.

“It may have been a shock to him to find us—in his state of mind—which I take it was not of the clearest.”

“You think he had been drinking?”

“I think it more than likely he had.”

Mr. Mivor postponed all further questions. He took out a neat little leather case, which he was in the habit of carrying with him on his professional rounds, and from this closely packed repository he selected a powder which he administered to the patient with his own hands, gravely watchful of him all the time. The old man’s eyes opened for a moment or two, only to close again.

“You will want a trained nurse,” he said presently, “if this person is to remain in your house—and indeed, it would not be safe for him to be moved for some days.”

“He will remain here, and I shall help to nurse him,” said Hester, who had resumed her seat by the sleeper’s pillow. “He is my father.”

“Your father! I did not quite understand,”

said the doctor, not a little surprised at this revelation, for he had noted the ragged flannel shirt, the greasy coat-collar, and the general aspect of foulness and decay which made the old man's presence in that room a cause of wonder.

Her father! This poor human wreck the father of the beautiful Mrs. Hanley, about whom there had been so many speculations! Were some of her malevolent detractors right after all, and did she really come from the gutter?

He looked at the old man's face more thoughtfully than before. Bloated and disfigured as those features were by evil habits, they did not show the coarse modelling which is supposed to go with low birth. The hand lying inert on the plush coverlet was slender and finely formed—a hand that had never been hardened by the day-labourer's work. The man might once have been a gentleman. The capacity for intemperance is sometimes immeasurable even in gentle blood.

Mr. Mivor was not quite satisfied with the aspect of the case. He did not implicitly believe that story of the old man's entrance upon the scene, and immediate seizure. The stroke was

a paralytic stroke, he had no doubt of that—but he suspected that there was something being kept from him, and he was all the more suspicious after Mrs. Hanley's admission of her relationship to the patient. His duty, however, lay clear before him. Whatever might have happened in the small hours of the night that was gone—even if there had been a quarrel between the old man and the young one, and violence of some kind, as he suspected—the man was not dead. His duty was to cure him, if he could, and his interest was to keep his suspicions to himself.

“I'll telegraph to London for a hospital nurse, if you like,” he said.

“Pray do,” assented Gerard, ringing the bell. “I'll send off your telegram as soon as it is written.”

“And in the meantime,” said the doctor, writing his message at a table where there were all the necessary materials ready to his hand, “I will help you to get the patient comfortably to bed.”

“His room is quite ready,” Hester said. “I can do anything for him—I am used to waiting upon him.”

“He has been ill before now, I suppose, then?”

“Never so bad as this. I never saw him lose consciousness as he did last night—after he fell.”

Her faltering accents and the distress in her face assured Mr. Mivor that his conjecture was well founded, but he pressed her with no further questioning, and quietly, with the skill and gentleness of the trained practitioner, he assisted the scared man-servant to carry the slumbering form to the room above, and assisted Hester in removing the weather-stained outer garments, and settling the patient comfortably in the bed that had been made ready.

The fire burned cheerily in the old-fashioned grate, the autumn sun shone brightly outside. The room with its dainty French paper and white furniture looked fresh and pure as if it had been prepared for a bride—and there on the bed lay the victim of his own vices—those negative sins of sloth and intemperance which are supposed to injure only the sinner.

“My poor father has been wandering about the country till his clothes have got into this dreadful state,” Hester said to the doctor,

apologetically, as she laid the wretched garments on a chair. "I have a trunk full of his things in the house, ready for him when he wants them. I suppose it is my duty to tell you that he has been the victim of intemperate habits, induced in the first instance by acute neuralgia. He is very much to be pitied, poor dear. You won't tell any one, will you?"

"Tell any one! My dear young lady, what do you think doctors are made of? Family secrets are as sacred for us as they are for the priesthood. It was very easy for me to guess that drink—and only drink—could have brought a gentleman to this sad pass. And now I shall leave you to take care of him till the nurse arrives. I dare say she will be here early in the afternoon. I'll look in before dark."

When he was gone Hester examined her father's pockets. In the large outside pocket of the shooting jacket there was a shattered volume of Horace, containing the satires, the margins annotated in Nicholas Davenport's small penmanship—penmanship which had retained something of its original microscopic neatness, in spite of shaken nerves and tremulous fingers.

In the breast-pocket of the same coat there were a good many pages of manuscript, with many interlineations and blottings, indicative of strenuous labour. These were all of the same character, metrical translations of some of the satires. These attempts indicated extraordinary labour, the same passages being reproduced over and over again—now in one metre, now in another—but no section of the work was finished. There were all the marks of a weakened will directing a once powerful intellect.

Hester gave these pages to Gerard presently when he came in to look at the patient. She gave them to him in silence, not even looking at him, lest her face should express too intense a reproach. These laboured translations proved how completely the scholar had been duped by the man who had deliberately tempted him back into the way of vice.

“Poor fellow! Yes, he tried to earn my money. He had the instinct of a gentleman. I was a scoundrel, and you do well to hate or to despise me. I am worthy of nothing better.”

“Hate you!” she repeated, in a low, broken voice, “you know I can never do that. You did

not realise what you were doing, or you never could have done such a cruel thing. You have ruined him, body and soul; but I am as much to blame as you. If I had been true to myself and to him, I might have found him and brought him back."

"Yes, if you had sacrificed youth, and love, and loveliness, and all fair things in this brief life for that worn-out hulk. No, Hester, I am not brutal, I am not heartless. I am sorry for him; but he is the victim of his own instincts, and if the opportunity had not come from my hand it would have come from some other hand. I should be much more sorry if you had gone on with that dull slavery which cut you off from all the joys that youth has a right to claim from life. I was mad when I saw your patient drudgery, your blank pleasureless days. I would have done a worse thing than I did to rescue you. And now—well—we must do the best we can for him"—with a reluctant glance at the sleeper. "After all, he is no worse off than many an elderly Croesus struck down in the midst of his possessions. To this complexion we must all come at last."

Hester answered nothing to his philosophical summing up of the situation. She took her seat by the bedside, watchful, ready to carry out the doctor's instructions, which were of the simplest. There was hardly anything to be done. The old man might awaken from that prolonged slumber in his right mind, or he might not. She could but wait and watch. She had drawn down the blinds, and sat in the subdued light—sat with folded hands, and lips which moved in prayer to that Personal God of whose non-existence her latest studies had assured her. In this hour of agony and self-reproach her thoughts went back into the old paths; and even in the Great Perhaps there was some touch of comfort. Surely somewhere, she told herself, there must exist some Spirit of love and pity, some Universal All-comprehending Mind greater than the mind of man, to which sorrow could make its appeal—in which despair could find a refuge. All the peoples of the earth have felt the necessity for a God. Could this blind groping after the Great Spirit mean nothing, after all? The words of her new teachers—words of power from the pens of men who had thought

long and deeply, who had brought culture and pure science to bear upon the problems of life and mind—came back to her in their inflexible assuredness—the words of men who said there was no God, and that the world was none the poorer for the loss of Him—the words of men who said that this life could be full of grace and pleasantness and hope and love, albeit there was no better life beyond, and our beloved dead were verily and for ever dead.

And then words more familiar, words known long before, recurred with a quieting power, like the sound of a melody learnt in childhood, and a gush of tears loosened the iron bands that held her heart, and a ray of hope stole in upon the darkness of her thoughts. “Come unto Me all ye that are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

CHAPTER XII.

“ALAS FOR ME, THEN, MY GOOD DAYS ARE
DONE.”

LIFE went by with dull and measured pace after that night of terror. Nicholas Davenport recovered consciousness upon awakening from that prolonged slumber, which may have marked the exhaustion following upon long wanderings from village to village, poor food, and unrestful nights in miserable beds. Hester found a rough record of his journeyings in his pockets, in the shape of crumpled tavern bills—the earliest in date a weekly account from the landlord of a little inn at Abingdon. This dated as far back as August, and it was evident the old man had gone to Abingdon almost immediately upon the receipt of Gerard’s money, it might be with some dim idea of being near Oxford and the Bodleian, or

it might be from some memories of joyous days spent along the river when he was an undergraduate. There were several bills from the Abingdon Inn, spreading over a period of six or seven weeks, and the bills marked a downward progress in the drunkard's career, each successive account showing a larger consumption of alcohol. The last account was not receipted, and it seemed but too likely that the old man had left in debt.

Later bills showed a journey down the river, by land or water. The names of the towns or villages where he had stopped had a rustic sound, the signs of the inns were quaint and old-fashioned. The Ring of Bells. The Old House at Home. The First and Last. But whatever the sign might be, Nicholas Davenport's bill showed that his chief outlay had been for alcohol—brandy in the earlier stages of the journey. Later, when his funds were dwindling, the drink had been gin. The unhappy man had chosen the very worst direction for his fated footsteps, for in those low-lying rural villages by the river he must have found the atmosphere most calculated to bring back those neuralgic agonies which had been first the cause, and

afterwards both cause and excuse, for his intemperance. His daughter's care had kept the fiend at a distance, but he had gone in the very way of his old enemy. The last in date of all the bills was a scrawling memorandum from a wayside public-house in the next village to Lowcombe, and hardly two miles from the Rosary. It was doubtless from the fireside gossips of the tap-room that Nicholas Davenport had heard that description of Mr. and Mrs. Hanley and their manner of life which had led him to suspect their identity with Gerard and Hester. And now he was stretched on a sick bed, helpless, the power of movement lost to the long lank limbs: helpless and almost imbecile. The mind was dim and blurred. Memory was gone, save for rare and sudden flashes of recollection, which had about them something strange and unearthly that thrilled his daughter with awe. Some sudden allusion to the past, some sharp, clear, scrap of speech startled and scared her as if the dead had spoken. His imbecility seemed far less unnatural, less painful even, than these transient revivifications of sense and memory.

The nursing sister, a quiet, orderly person be-

tween thirty and forty, tall, broad-shouldered, vigorous, and with a hearty appetite for her meals, relieved Hester's watches in the invalid's room; and after the first week a male attendant was engaged, who would be able to assist in getting the patient out of doors, so soon as he should be well enough to be moved into a bath chair, and wheeled about the gardens and lanes. Mr. Mivor explained to Hester that her father's condition was not so much an illness as a state. He had little hope in any marked recovery, physical or mental. Mr. Davenport's constitution had been destroyed by intemperance, and the surprise, the shock, whatever it was that brought about the seizure of the other night, had only precipitated a crisis that was, in a measure, inevitable.

Hester's colour came and went as she listened to his opinion. She lifted her eyes to the doctor with an imploring look.

"Tell me the truth, Mr. Mivor, the whole truth. Do you really think that what happened the other night has made hardly any difference to my father—that this sad state of things must have come about, even if——"

“Even if there had been no agitating cause—no fall. Yes, I do. But the fall came before the stroke, I think, did it not?”

“Yes, I am sorry to say,” and then in trembling accents she went on, “I am so anxious to know the truth, to know the worst even, that I must tell you all. You have promised to keep our secrets?”

“Yes, yes, be assured that you can trust me.”

“I left my home to spend my life with Mr. Hanley—left without my father’s knowledge. He was away from our poor lodgings at the time—and I thought that he had deserted me, and I may have cared less on that account, perhaps. But he had not meant to abandon me, I am sure. He had gone away under a misapprehension, and after wandering about the country he found us here—and he was not quite himself, I think, for he spoke to me cruelly—with words which no father——”

She broke down, sobbing out the bitter memory of that night. The worthy doctor soothed her with kindly sympathy. He had seen much of those storms of care and woe, anger and strife, that rage in the households whose outward

seeming is peace and pleasantness, and he had a tender heart for the sorrows of his patients, especially for a young and beautiful woman who was expiating the sin of having loved too well, and who was evidently not of the clay of which sinners are made.

“Don’t tell me any more,” he said, “there were high words—a little bit of a scuffle perhaps, and your father fell. I thought as much when I helped to undress him. I examined him carefully. There were two or three incipient bruises—nothing more. Such a fall would not have produced the seizure. That was the result of gradual decay, the decay of an alcoholised brain. Your father has been the chief sinner against himself.”

There was infinite relief in this opinion so far as Gerard was concerned, but it did not lessen the burden of her own remorseful conscience. She blamed herself for this final ruin of the life she had fought so hard to reclaim.

One duty, one atonement, only remained, she thought, and that was to bear her burden, and to make this broken life as happy as she could. Her father knew her, and took pleasure in her

companionship. That was much. He accepted his surroundings without inquiry or astonishment, and enjoyed the luxuries that were provided for him without asking whence they came. He saw Gerard without agitation, occasionally recognising him and addressing him by name, at other times greeting him with the distant politeness due to a stranger. And Gerard endured his presence in the house, at first with a sublime patience, even going out of his way to pay the feeble old man little attentions when he met him in the garden or neighbouring lanes on sunny mornings, dragged along in his comfortable Bath chair, wrapped to the chin in fur, with Hester walking at his side. While the scene of that awful night, the fears that had haunted him in the slow hours of waiting for dawn and the doctor, were still fresh in his memory, a touch of pity and remorse made him patient of a presence which could not bring comfort or pleasantness into his retreat; but after a month of this endurance, the incubus began to oppress and annoy him, even although Hester took care that he should see as little as possible of that third inmate of the house, and

refrained from worrying him with any details of her father's life, whether he were better or worse, cheerful or depressed. The mere consciousness of the old man's existence became unbearable, and Gerard urged the need of placing him in a sanatorium, where, as he argued, he would be better cared for than in any private home.

Hester was unhesitating in her refusal.

"He could not be happier or better cared for than he is here," she said, "and even if he were as well cared for, which I doubt, I should not know it, and should be miserable about him."

"That is rather a bad look-out for me. And how long is this kind of thing to last?"

"As long as he lives."

"And according to your friend, Mr. Mivor, he may last for years—a wreck, but a living wreck—and in that case he will outlast me. You cannot mean it, Hester. You can't mean to abandon me for—this unlucky old man?"

"Abandon you! Gerard, how could you think it?"

"But I must think it. No one can serve two masters. If you insist upon staying here to

nurse your father, you can't go to the South with me, and what becomes of our winter in Italy?"

"I have been thinking of that," she said, with a troubled look. "But is it really necessary for you to go to the South? The weather has been so mild."

"It generally is before Christmas. Winter doesn't begin to show his teeth till January."

"And you have been so well."

"Not well enough to face five months cold weather, or to disobey my doctor. He told me to winter in the South."

Hester sighed, and was silent for a few moments. Oh, that dream of the lovely South, how sweet it had been, how fondly she had dwelt upon Browning's Italian poems, upon all those word-pictures of mountain and olive wood, cypress and aloe; the hill-side chapel, the mule path, the straggling town upon the mountain ridge, the vine-shadowed *berceau*, the sapphire lake. And she had to renounce this fair dream; and infinitely worse, she had to part from Gerard. If he must go to the South, they must be parted.

"I would give up anything rather than leave my father," she said quietly. "I think you must know how I have looked forward to seeing that lovely South, the countries that seem a kind of dreamland when one thinks of them in our prosaic world, and seeing them with you—with you! But if you must go, you must go alone. You will come back to me, won't you, dear? The parting won't be for ever?"

"I shall come back—yes, of course, if I live; but it will be hideously dreary for you here all the winter. Surely you could trust your father to the nurse and his man. They are very kind to him, aren't they?"

"Yes, they are kind, and I am here to see that they are kind. How do I know what would happen if I were away? He is very trying sometimes. They might lose patience with him."

"A sharp word would not hurt him once in a way. They would have to be kind to him in the main. His existence means bread and cheese for them, and it would be to their interest to make him comfortable."

"That would not absolve me from my duty, Gerard. No; I must stay with him till the end."

"Well, you must do as you please. If you find this place too dismal or too damp you can take your invalid to Hastings or Torquay. He could travel as far as that, I suppose?"

"I don't think so. Mr. Mivor said that any fatigue or excitement might be dangerous. He is to be kept as quiet as possible, and this place suits him admirably."

"And he suits Mivor as a patient."

"That's a very unfair insinuation, Gerard. Mr. Mivor might come to see him every day, yet he only comes once in ten days. He told me the other day that he would not come again unless he were sent for; but I urged him to come occasionally just to see that no neglect was arising."

"I don't grudge Mivor his fees. I only lament the change that has come into our life—the life we were to lead together," and then, touched by the sadness in Hester's face, he went on "after all, if the winter were very mild, I might rub on here, perhaps."

"No, no," she cried eagerly, "you must run no risk. Oh, Gerard, surely you know how precious your life is to me—dearer than any

other life. You must know that it is duty that keeps me here—that love would have me always by your side.”

“I know that you have all the obstinate clinging to unthankful duties which is a characteristic of your sex,” he said; “or perhaps I ought to say a characteristic of good women. The bad ones throw their caps over the mill, laugh duty to scorn, and, I believe, get the best out of life. Theirs is the Esau’s portion, the savoury mess that they long for, the pleasure that comes at the nick of time. After all, I think that is the best.”

He was lying back in his low *bergère* beside the drawing-room fire, his arms flung up above his head, his eyes gazing dreamily at the flaming logs, in that brief half-hour when the cold, pale winter day melts into darkness. He was very fond of Hester still, perfectly contented in her society; but he had begun to think of other things when he was with her, and he hated that presence of the old man and his attendants upstairs. One of the rooms that Davenport occupied was over the drawing-room, and Gerard could hear footsteps crossing the floor now and

then, the male attendant's heavy tread, the nursing sister's lighter footfall, and at seven o'clock every evening the wheels of the invalid-chair drawn slowly across the room. He knew the automatic routine of that sad life, the hour at which the patient was dressed, his meals, his airing, the business of getting him to bed, which happened before Hester and Gerard sat down to dinner. He knew all these details, though Hester had talked of the patient so little—knew them by their monotonous recurrence. He considered what he should do with himself in the winter, how make life most pleasant to himself now that the spell which had bound him to the Rosary was broken? He had been warned against all excitement. The feverish life of the dissipated idler was not for him. The utmost that he could allow himself in the way of relaxation would be the society of clever people, and a little quiet dinner-giving in his fine London house. He could oscillate between London and the Rosary, and Hester need feel no sense of desertion. The winter season had begun; there would be plenty of pleasant people in London. His sister was to be married in the first week of

the new year, and he would have to be in Devonshire for that occasion. His mother had written to him several times since her return from the Continent, urging him to go and see her, full of vague uneasiness about the life he was leading.

"If Hester owes a duty to her father, I have my obligation to my people," he said to himself, in that long reverie by the fire-side. "I have to consider the claims of those who have never brought disgrace upon me as that old sot has done upon her."

"What are you thinking of so earnestly, Gerard?" Hester asked presently, watching his face in the fitful light.

"I am thinking of my mother."

The answer chilled her. His mother; yes, he, too, had those who were near and dear to him—those in whose lives she had no part.

"Your mother. Ah, how kind she was to me, and what ages ago that old life seems. Shall I ever see her again, I wonder?" she speculated, with a sigh.

And then came the bitter thought: What could his mother think of her? Disgraced, dis-

honoured, nameless; an outcast in the sight of such a woman as the Rector's wife. She did not reckon upon a good woman's Christian charity. She thought of the Rector's wife only as of one who had never been touched by sin, and who could make no allowances.

"Your sister is to be married very soon, I suppose?" she said, interrogatively, after a long pause.

"In the first week of the year. I shall have to be at the wedding."

"Of course. My heart will go with you, and all my warmest wishes for her happiness—even though she and I may never meet again."

"Don't harp upon that string, Hester. Let the future take care of itself. You are getting morbid in this odious house."

"Odious! Oh, Gerard, we have been so happy here; I thought you loved this house."

"So I did, while it was full of sunshine and flowers, and before you turned it into a hospital. Don't let us quarrel, Hester. I'm a little hipped, and I shall be saying disagreeable things without meaning them. You have reminded me of my sister's wedding, and that I have not even

thought of a wedding present. What shall I give her ? ”

“Something very handsome, of course ; but I know how charitable she is, and that she would rather have something for the poor people in her new parish.”

“She shall have anything she likes for her poor ; but she must have something which she can look at by and by as her brother’s gift. Cheques are the most fashionable offerings from rich relatives, so I shall give her a cheque ; but there must be something else—a service of plate, I think, will be best. She and Cumberland would never have the heart to buy silver for themselves. He would say, ‘It should be melted down and given to the poor ;’ but Lilian will not have my gifts melted down. I will go up to town to-morrow and choose the service—fine old Georgian plate such as will not seem an anachronism in their old Georgian house. I know even Cumberland has one small vanity. He wants everything in his house to be of the same period as the building itself.”

Gerard went to London on the following morning, and for the first time since he had lived at

the Rosary, told Hester not to expect his return that evening.

“I may be in London for two or three days,” he said. “I have a good deal to do there.”

She made no murmur. She saw him off at the gate with a smile, standing waving her hand to him in the winter sunlight, and then she went lowly back to the house with an aching heart.

“‘Alas, for me, then, my good days are done,’” she sighed, quoting her favourite Elaine.

END OF VOL. II.





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